

the kubler-ross theory

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the kubler-ross theory

by [antivenom](#)

Summary

Peter loses Gwen in a split-second of motion.
It takes much, much longer for him to find himself afterwards.

(In which Peter deals with a loss that immobilizes him and permeates through every drawn breath. In which his grief is a visceral abstraction that he can touch, that he can feel. And in which, with a little help, with time, with acceptance, with anger, with sadness, with Wade, he learns how to live in a world without her.)

Notes

I pull mostly from the movies, but there are some comics mixed in. Basically Peter and Gwen meet in college and fall and love. Peter is a second semester sophomore and has been Spider-Man since he was 16.

Deadpool comes in at word 5648; if that doesn't tell you anything, just know that this will be the slowest of slow burns, and the relationship itself is not the focus.

This fic is intense. It starts out only hours after Gwen's death and it takes 80k to get to only two years after it. Please be aware that grief is a process, and it's ugly, and I've tried to capture it here.

detonation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 5 hours, 6 minutes

Grief is a dark room with the shades drawn.

It's a box that no one can look into except the resident who calls it home. It's like Schrodinger's model: that cat isn't dead until someone observes that it is (despite the fact that it's been 81 years so *of course* the cat is dead, of course it is, how can it not be.) Instead grief is a casual state of being neither alive nor dead. Unknown.

This isn't happening, right? Not until someone else observes it. Right now Peter is stuck in his own dark room with the shades drawn, reality separated from him. He's far enough away from it that nothing seems real.

How did he get here? He doesn't remember. He remembers tugging off the mask and holding her, begging, *begging*, (the cat is dead you saw it die) *wishing* with everything he'd had to go back four years, undo it all, every moment, every night on the streets, every wound, *everything*.

He'd give up everything he was for her. He should have. He promised, once, that he would.

Spider-Man finds himself standing in his empty apartment, lungs stuttering inside his chest. He takes his gloves off, holds them in one hand. Drops them to the floor like they've burned him.

He hooks a bare, trembling finger in his left webshooter. It's about half full from the looks of it. (He could have done more. He could have--)

Deft fingers unhook it from his wrist. He holds the shooter between his thumb and forefinger for a while, and doesn't realize he's clutching too tightly until the cartridge cracks and the pressure shifts, ruining the whole mechanism for good.

He drops that, too, left hand dripping in web fluid. He clenches a fist around it and that's when he sees them, the splotches of purple on his still-suited arm. He wipes the web fluid from the back of his left hand on his chest and skims his index finger down his right arm.

The pad of his finger comes away red.

Grief is a room with the shades drawn. When Peter pulls back the curtains, right now, he sees

Spider-Man fumbling to rid himself of the suit, ignoring the pain as he twinges new injuries. The whole situation carries a stench that only he can smell, and it's...it's too real, too encompassing, and he can't. He can't believe it.

He's numb for a moment, shock dulling the heat of a detonation only five hours old.

He's tripping from his boots. His arms are speckled from blood that had soaked through the fabric. He feels the pressure of her head in the crook of his arm, the warm wetness as-- "No," Spider-Man says, out loud, as if the physicality of the words will stop the tide. It won't. He'll drown beneath it anyway.

In the bathroom, he turns the water on cold, heavy, and throws himself underneath the spray until he prunes, until he cannot breathe, until there is ice in his throat, until he is clean. (But he's not clean; the blood is still there, beneath the surface, on his suit, in his mind, *everywhere*. The blood that beats through his own veins doesn't even feel natural.)

He'd always wanted to live inside her mind but not like this, not this literally.

Grief is a room with the shades drawn, and in the overwhelming waterfall of cold, Peter closes his eyes and sees nothing but darkness.

0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 23 hours, 18 minutes

When Peter Parker finds out that Gwen Stacy is dead he does not believe it.

(Oh he *knows*, of course he does. He knew it before she'd even hit the ground, knew it in the way she reached for him, the slow-motion of his limbs and the calming of his heart.)

"I just..." He stutters, grasping for something that has always been there, *always*, but isn't anymore. "I just talked to her yesterday...she can't..."

Call him an actor, a fake. Accuse of him of lying to everyone he knows and sabotaging the things he loves, but this, right here, this surge of confusion, the bad taste of horror in his mouth; this he cannot fake.

It's like he's been ripped from his own limbs, they were so intimately familiar to him that the ghost of them sends pain through him. He can feel it as if his amputated parts are still there, as if he hasn't yet lost them. Lost her. He used to be whole and now he's finding out he never will be again. Large hunks of liver, shavings of his aorta, the tendons behind his kneecaps that used to hold him steady on his own feet--parts of him that Peter used to think were vital to survival--are just gone.

"Oh, sweetheart," Aunt May says, lips twisting like they're fighting a battle, eyes welling, welling, and this is Peter's *fault*. He *caused this*.

It can't be...It can't be true. Can it? He's fast, he's strong, he's *mutated*, for God's sake, and yet he still could not save the one thing that mattered to him above everything else. There's a way these things work, a science to it. This is unprecedented, it's unfounded, it's not real. Peter has holes in his body large enough that someone could stick their whole fist through, so how is he still breathing? How is Gwen *not* breathing?

"Aunt May?" Peter asks, desperate. His voice has gone high. His world is spinning panic, crashing disbelief. It wells up, desperate. His world is white noise and lungs that do not work, it's trembling

hands in an oppressive quiet. It's a room, closed, sealed, filling up with water, draining of air. "Aunt May, please, I--" He can't force the words out.

He's wheezing.

"Peter," She says, and this is Ben, this is Ben all over again. Peter weighed down by the burden of his own failure, Aunt May blind to everything but the simplicity of loss. "Peter, sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

She hugs him.

He's crying, he realizes from somewhere distant, cavernous. He's crying but the act is nothing more than small droplets of water down his face. His chest is so tight he cannot possibly be feeling anything, anything at all.

0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 3 days, 6 hours, 55 minutes

He's a scientist, or hopes to be. He goes about it procedurally.

(Define. What is the problem? What assumptions are you making? What are the constraints?)

The problem is Spider-Man, lying boneless and in pieces all over his room.

He places his suit jacket on the hanger and glances at himself briefly in the mirror. His eyes are drawn inward. He's wearing emotion like exhaustion.

Next comes his shirt, starch pressed and buttoned to the throat. He slides it off, straightens the sleeves, the collar, and hangs it off another hanger. In the dark of his room, his uncovered forearms look strange and alien.

(Plan. State any developed assumptions. Write equations. Develop procedure.)

A bird's-eye view shows him his own weakness, spread in scarlet pieces over the thready carpeting of his shitty apartment. He realizes with some sort of distant disappointment Spider-Man is little more than a man, not something powerful or meaningful or promising, or anything that he'd intended the mask to become.

Spider-Man is just spandex and guilt, that's it, nothing more.

Peter Parker as a man is a writhing mess of organs and yet still gutless. He was never really sure of himself before, always tentative without the suit, clumsy without something to hide behind, and now the very fact that he hid behind the mask feels like a cop-out, and a shitty one at that.

Oh, the world can blame Spider-Man and not Peter, but Peter doesn't have the luxury of separating the two. He thought he could; his sole goal in the mask was keeping his lives separate but they both feel pretty meaningless right now. What's the point of an identity if this is the outcome? Why bother with Spider-Man at all?

Anyway.

(Gather materials. What do you need? How will you get there?)

He picks up two gloves and places them in a bagless metal trashcan he usually keeps below the

sink. Moving across the room, he scoops the body of the suit, browned and crusted with blood and sweat, and tosses it on top. Boots follow.

He sticks his hand inside the mask and lets it fan out across his palm. He looks down at himself.

(Evaluate. Do your units make sense? Does this answer the question?)

Mirrored eyepieces and webbed detail stare back at him. Everything fluid, tight, and designed in red and blue and how fucking stupid is that? To put on a suit and pretend to be serving a cause bigger than himself. To feel power from a personality that did not belong to him. What was he thinking? Who did he want to be?

Gwen is dead because of this.

Peter looks at the mask and sees her closed casket and public funeral, sees Calvary Cemetery underneath a gray afternoon of clouds. Most of all he sees her. Her outstretched hand. The sound her body made in the cradle of his webs. That's all she is. A split second of motion.

He drops the mask in with the rest of the suit.

He sets the can on the kitchen counter and pauses a moment.

Peter looks out the window. It's not raining but the night is murky with clouds. It's close to midnight. The funeral had run long; lunch afterward had turned into socializing and Aunt May doesn't want him to be alone for the foreseeable future. For tonight, though, he managed to avoid her, begging off with a claim of packing up his things and getting some time to think.

In the bathroom, he uncaps a full bottle of rubbing alcohol and carries it back to the kitchen. He's not going to stand on ceremony; this doesn't deserve that. At Gwen's funeral there'd been people, dozens of them. One of her fellow interns at OsCorp, a student from her high school, aunts, uncles. Her mother, whip-cut and unafraid to show it, pushed to the point where the devastation made her hollow. They all told stories about how *smart* she was, how *talented*. She'd been so beautiful, inside and out.

It was all true, of course it was. Peter had seen firsthand her beauty, her intelligence. He remembers walking through the streets of Williamsburg with her, snapping pictures when she wasn't looking. Over coffee he'd let her see them and she'd blushed and deflected, saying he was a stereotypical hipster and she wouldn't stand for it anymore.

Peter thinks, idly, that he still has those pictures, action shots, landscapes, somewhere on his external hard drive. Her hair in falling waves, blonde and unkempt from the city humidity, bangs ratty and in her eyes. Her head tilted back in a laugh, teeth exposed, eyes crinkling.

He would probably still think the shots were beautiful, but he wouldn't be able to *stand* the sight of them anymore. Even thinking about them makes something nasty curl through his stomach. He won't delete them but he won't look at them again.

(Implement. Perform the experiment)

Instead he turns the bottle over and drenches the spandex, lets the whole damn room smell like isopropyl alcohol. He's not pretending to bleach himself clean, because that's melodramatic and ridiculous.

Instead he strikes a match and lets Spider-Man burn, lets the end come in an inferno. For a moment, before they crumble, the dark corners of his life light up in perfect orange. This ending is

imperfect, but then he wasn't expecting an end at all. But that's how it works, really. That's how all of this works.

0 years, 0 months, 0 weeks, 3 days, 7 hours, 4 minutes

Alcohol, fire, and smoke clog his nose, mix together in a way that churns his stomach, and as soon as the flames are out his lunch is climbing its way out of his stomach. He barely makes it into the bathroom in time to rid himself of it.

His mind is a mantra of Gwen, the way she smelled, the way she tasted. The way she could *never* correct Peter's homework mistakes without being condescending. Her tentative hands on his bare chest, the hunch-set of her shoulders standing in front of Flash, her voice, trembling, when she lifted up the mask and saw who was underneath.

The quiet resonance of the place where she rests now, the last person standing ceremony over her dropping his head and burning his life.

Peter tucks himself in the shallow corner between the toilet and the tub and wraps his arms around his legs, tips his head back, lets go.

She's dead and he killed her.

She had a simple faith in him, built by study sessions, in whispered distractions late in the library, forged through the anxiety of schoolwork, the quiet dinners on the couch (she'd steal is edamame and he'd eat her water chestnuts. He liked baby corn and she liked the long carrot strips. They were Chinese food compliments, their only corner of perfection together).

She wanted to go to Europe, he knows. And she'd wanted him to go with her. He could've proposed at the top of the Eiffel Tower, on a gondola under the Italian stars, as the clock struck midnight in the busy wake of Big Ben.

He choking on salt water, now, but he can't sit here and deny the truth any longer. Spider-Man is in ashes in the next room and Gwen is in the ground.

It's an end to something, he knows, but not much of a beginning.

Peter doesn't move for hours, just tries to breath through it, doesn't try to convince himself it'll be okay. It won't. A half-dozen mourners couldn't convince him of that, sympathetic pats and all, and his own mind knows those placations are meaningless when compared to what he knows about Gwen's death.

He did this. He did this. He did this he did this *he did this*.

If there are claws in his chest then he put them there; this is no one's fault but his own.

0 years, 0 months, 1 week, 0 days, 15 hours

“Do you want any more, Peter?” Aunt May asks him. He glances down at his half full plate, watches his fork comb through what’s left of his serving of her casserole.

“No, thank you.” He replies.

“Okay.” She tells him, and something deep inside is screaming at himself, how could he do this, how could he let this happen, he has one thing left now and he’s pushing her away. “What are your plans for this evening?”

“I have a Bio midterm I need to study for.” He replies blankly. His fork is separating the ingredients of his casserole. A pile of rice, a separate stack of chicken, broccoli. His plate is streaked with cheese and breadcrumbs.

“Peter, do you really think that’s such a good idea?” Aunt May has never dimmed her concern for him. She has always loved him plainly, as if he was her own. “I’m sure your professor will understand.”

He shakes his head. “I have to take this test.” He tells her.

There’s a beat of silence. He scrapes metal against porcelaine.

“Peter,” She says, softer now, even more concerned. She approaches him like he’s an injured bird in need of help, and it’s nothing he deserves. “It’s hardly been a week since--”

He cuts her off (screaming, screaming inside because he’s so fucking mad, so *fucking* mad, and this is all he knows now, this is all he can do) “She’s dead, Aunt May.” He snaps. “She’s dead and she’s not coming back and I have a Bio test tomorrow.”

Aunt May flinches back, startled. Peter isn’t going to presume to know what Gwen would have wanted for Peter to do, because Gwen wants nothing, now. Gwen is dead and ambition doesn’t last without breath. But he has nothing to do other than continue to forge through his life; he has nothing left.

Peter doesn’t notice his world blurring at the edges until Aunt May gets up from the table and places a firm hand on his shoulder.

He drops his head into his hand, cupping fingers over the bridge of his nose and his eyes, elbow gouged painfully into the table. The fork drops with a clatter.

“I’m sorry.” Peter says, bubbling with it. *I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m*

0 years, 0 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 8 hours

“Shit.” Jameson says, thumbing through his newest (and most likely last) stack of Spidey pictures. “Shit. Shit. Okay. Shit.” He abruptly glances up, “Kid, even you look like shit, what the hell is going on? Actually, scratch that, I don’t care. Don’t you have anything that says ‘I’m a Masked Drug Runner’? Or gang member? Crooked politician?”

“No.”

“Then what the hell am I paying you for?” Jameson asks and hits a button on his desk, “Betty! Come in here and fire this kid, I don’t want to look at him anymore.”

Peter doesn’t even react.

“What, you just gonna stand there gaping at me? You’re done! Out of here! Don’t come back until you have a picture of this menace doing something I can actually *print*.” He hits the button again. “Betty, *now!*”

“Mr. Jameson?” Peter finally manages, unable to hide the slow burn of heat beneath his words. He feels it distantly. A fire in a trashcan. The sun in a graveyard. “You’re the biggest douchebag I’ve ever met, and the single reason I await the death of print media.” He says. Jameson tries to interrupt, gaping like a suffocating fish, face draining and turning purple. Peter continues on. “But for the record, you were right about Spider-Man.”

Peter turns, hands forming fists beside him.

“What the--kid, you’ve got a lot of nerve telling me that, I swear to God.” Jameson says to his back, “Scratch what I said earlier. Don’t come back at all. I’ll find someone else to get my Spider-Man pictures.”

Peter watched Spider-Man die two weeks ago and does not mourn his loss. It aches, of course it does, but that’s it. It’s over. “Good luck.” He replies.

“Yeah, you’re done here.” Jameson spits, and that’s that.

0 years, 0 months. 3 weeks, 0 days, 0 hours, 0 seconds

Loss is red.

Loss is a cherry cough syrup popsicle that tastes like sickness, the heat death of a star. Loss is what Peter watches at night when he lies in his childhood bed and watches the ceiling shift in shadows, in memory.

When he was younger, he used to read novels that characterized anger as the color: red fire, heat, blood. But *loss* is red. It’s the darkest color of under-oxygenated blood from the deepest recesses of the human body. He feels her loss so intimately it can’t *be* anything else but something that comes from within himself. This right here is lifeblood that he tastes.

Instead anger is a transparent intensity.

He watches memories on the silk screen of his ceiling at midnight.

Captain Stacy bleeds a promise that Spider-Man never intended to keep. He paraded, egotistical, bragging, saying he wanted to keep his city safe, to keep himself and his family and his loved ones safe, but it meant jack shit, right? He’d promised never to drag anyone else into his secondary life, but as soon as Gwen saw underneath the mask, that was it.

And what the hell kind of hubris did he have, thinking that she would be invincible, too? He thought that for once having something warm to come home to, having someone to help shoulder his troubles, meant that something in the universe was looking out for him. But the universe is a vacuum and doesn't owe anyone any favors.

He's so *so* angry.

Anger is feeling her everywhere, a rock darkness in his chest, blood fingers in the cavern of his lungs, around the corner on the quad, behind the door as he unlocks it. This morning he'd lifted his phone to text her and had the message written before he'd remembered that Mrs. Stacy had closed her contract at Verizon. Anger is turning on the lights and finding out she's his ghost, nothing more. Anger is looking at himself in the mirror and wanting to crack the glass, splinter his haggard reflection in a thousand pieces, spitting *what are you doing* and *who the hell did you think you were*.

He imagines himself standing at the top of a sheer face of a cliff in Death Valley, maybe, where the granite rises thousands of feet into the flat sky, and the sun beats down heavily. Uncle Ben is dangling by his fingertips, dehydrated and sunken, four years dead.

"Pete." Ben pleads, "Pete, please."

Peter crouches and leans over him, glancing once downward to the sharp outcropping of rock below, and then glances back at Ben's face, weathered and desperate.

"Pete." Ben says again, and Peter spits in his face.

(He's not sure when he fell asleep, but he knows it's a dream because he wakes up gaping into the wet cotton of his pillow, plunging his nails into his thighs just to ground himself on what's real. It stings his flesh, breaks it, and he gets a hold of himself, panting, digging in harder just to remind himself that pain can be felt somewhere other than between his ears and inside his organs.)

0 years, 1 month, 1 week, 1 day, 1 hour, 1 second

When Peter was younger he used to imagine his parents as lost at sea; as if they went out one day and never found their way back. It was easier for Peter to rationalize it that way, as if they were desperate to return to their son, as if instead the universe and circumstance buried any chance they might have had. Peter had thought that being buried was better than being dead. He'd thought nothing of life past a process of oxygen, blood.

The fear, confusion, was, at times, all he felt like he had in common with the people that brought him into being. In middle school he'd thought he'd understood the gravity of the situation, thought that being marooned on his own island of isolation was exactly the way it felt. In high school, bruised and unpopular, his definition shifted but still remained largely the same. He thought he knew the taste of desperation, the way anxiety curled in the pit of his stomach, but he didn't, he really didn't.

He feels it now, a desperation so thick in his marrow he cannot swallow around it. He thinks it was cruel in his middle school years to imagine his parents as lost, because if they were, why didn't anyone find them? Why didn't anyone help? They were ocean travelers scrambling on splintered

wet boards, the water a looming giant all around. Infinity is not just a constant, like that. Instead it's something that shifts and reforms, a terrifying, hopeless void.

He knows now that his parents are never coming back, and if they are lost he has no way of finding them.

His own path is in smoke around him, watering though his eyes and choking his throat. Or maybe he, too, is drowning in the cold, salty sea and he can no longer remember the way up, the way to oxygen, freedom, life.

Aunt May finds him curled in the bathroom between the toilet and the shower, the latter spewing water onto the porcelain, making a sound to cover the wheeze in his breath.

She steps into the room in just her nightgown and threadbare robe, and as her eyes adjust to the dark, she sees the streaks on Peter's cheeks, the nail marks in his bare skin, sees how frail and small he is. For a moment, they are both phantasms of who they were in those desperate few months after they all realized Richard and Mary weren't coming back.

Aunt May's hands fly to her face and she lets out a gasp, eyes already welling. If grief is a room with the shades drawn, then she keeps trying to pull Peter's back only to find deeper darknesses.

Peter is six again with nothing to cling to, no bottom to the murky depths.

"Please," he whimpers, something fundamentally broken in his voice. "Aunt May, please." He hears Gwen's voice sometimes, but never enough to guide him, only enough to jerk him back under.

He does not know what he's begging for, maybe relief from the cold, maybe oxygen. Something. A hard end to the emptiness, something to scramble on top of that feels more solid, a drag friction to slow his free fall.

May doesn't turn on the lights. "Peter, I don't know what to do." May says, and he realizes that her own shades are drawn tight so Peter won't see them, and it breaks his heart again and again and again, like the tide, relentless on the shore

0 years, 1 month, 2 weeks, 6 days, 4 hours

The wind is so cold it hurts, throwing color into his cheeks. He feels bruised by it and tries to make himself smaller inside his coat. He'd forgotten gloves this morning when he left Aunt May's house for class.

He'd spent hours in the library, and now it's late and he has a long walk home. Lately school is the only corner in Peter's nothingness. At least school is something to do, somewhere to focus his attention that isn't all Gwen.

Across the street, the empty wind blows harshly into the side of an old metallic trashcan, which hits cracked concrete with a hollow crash.

(Gwen, tossing her Introduction to Psychology book at his head freshman year, Peter catching it out of thin air, Gwen sending him a confused look and making grabby hands for it. *I have*

homework, Pete. Peter, tossing it behind him, grinning. *Not now you don't.*)

Peter is stressed, he has a big lab write-up due in a few days, and for once this is the kind of weary exhaustion he can deal with. It has a clear end. Friday in Biology at 2PM.

Night in the winter city has fallen like a hush; fat snowflakes are falling around him, turned orange in the streetlights. Cabs sludge through the slush.

He could take the subway back, but there's something about the whirl of the track that makes him feel sick recently.

(Gwen, clinging to his hand on a crowded Sunday morning as they headed out of the city, stumbling against him as the train lurched from the station, her body a warm line against his own. *You're like one of those subway creeps, huh.* He'd scoffed at her. In response, she had elbowed him in his lower ribs and snaked a hand into his jacket pocket)

The streets are quiet and Peter's head is too loud. He burrows his fingers into the satin lining of his jacket and tips his head down, watching the patter of his feet across salted concrete, feeling the sting of cold to his reddening ears.

"Hey!" he hears, suddenly, and comes up short. The back of his neck is tingling, a sensation that kills him a little every time he ignores it.

He slows his walking anyway, tries to listen.

"Gimme your purse and your jacket and nobody gets hurt." A slurred voice, gruff, weathered.

"Okay, okay, please," A second voice, younger. Female.

Peter takes an involuntary step.

"Faster!" A clipped warning, a shout, and then the female's voice gasping with pain.

Suddenly, from around the corner, a tall, thin man comes thundering, purse clutched in his hand. The man comes up short when he sees Peter, and then obviously decides he's no threat, because he resumes his sprinting, colliding heavy with Peter and sending him off balance before disappearing down the block.

Peter stumbles backward a moment before righting himself and peering around the corner, only to find the woman bent solidly over, clutching her face, sobbing and alone.

Peter is not Spider-Man.

Peter is Peter Parker, twenty years old, a struggling biomolecular engineering major, a man so deep in mourning he's not sure who really got buried so many weeks ago.

He reels backward as if he'd been hit, listens to the woman cry and cry and cry, and has to dig his canines into the skin of his wrist to keep himself from doing something that might bring back the bile of his old life.

(Gwen, clinging to the ribbed spandex covering his shoulders, breathing heavily *I trust you I love you I know you'll keep me safe*)

0 years, 1 month, 3 weeks, 3 days, 12 hours

Peter doesn't go to class today. Instead he lies in bed with the door locked, eyes glazed. Aunt May knocks and he doesn't answer.

His sheets and mattress swallow around him.

He watches the sun bleed over a ground covered in snow.

0 years, 1 month, 3 weeks, 4 days, 12 hours

"Pete. Hey," A voice of a classmate.

Dr. Armandi had just finished lecturing, and students were beginning to file out into the snow.

Armandi teaches a hard and fast Linear Algebra series; this is a class that Gwen took last semester when Peter was taking Differential Equations. She'd be in Differential Equations now, if she was still--

"Peter!"

Peter turns and sees the round face of a classmate he can't quite place.

"Hey, how'd you do on that last midterm?" Nate, maybe?, asks, a friendly grin playing on his face.

Nate, Tate, whatever, didn't know Gwen.

"Did Armandi post the grades?" Peter asks. He doesn't know how he did. He hardly remembers taking the test.

"Yeah, man, this morning." Tate grimaces. "At least the curve in this class is going to be wicked. Like Everest tall."

Peter scrolls absently through his phone, plugs in his password, clicks on the class page. "What did you get?" He asks idly as his grade loads.

"Sixty-five." Nate replies, proudly.

Peter stares at the black 58 printed neatly in Courier New next to his name. He feels a spark of irritation.

"Not too bad." Tate is peering over his shoulder to look, invading Peter's personal bubble. He poses no threat, but Peter can feel his hackles raise, his breath coming shallower, a tingle through the top of his spine. "Don't worry, man. I heard the average was like a 60. You'll catch the curve."

"Don't worry?" Peter asks, heat seeping into his voice. He doesn't even remember taking the test. He doesn't remember studying for it. It's too irrelevant to worry about. Jesus. Who the hell even cares.

Tate backs up a step. His coloring, all pale skin and fine white blond hair, is turning ruddy with the

cold. “Yeah,” He says, beginning to frown. “Hey, weren’t you the guy that got, like, a ninety on that first test? The one that murdered the rest of us?”

He was.

And Gwen had *whooped* when he found out, laughed with him, because that was higher than any midterm grade she’d ever gotten in that class. The test doesn’t matter now. Drinking stale root beer in the January fuzz of evening with her, celebrating, is the part he cares for, holds on to.

When Peter doesn’t respond, Nate slaps him on the back, casually friendly. “Dude,” He asks, “What happened?”

Something tense tugs tighter inside him, like a rope holding a pulling weight. It frays, pulling tighter still, until he feels the thrum of his own heartbeat in his palms. He grits his teeth against it and tries to ignore the part of him *screaming*.

Tate is apparently still looking for an answer.

Peter doesn’t have one. “Fuck off.” he says instead, his voice grinding stones into gravel.

“Woah, Peter, I--”

“Seriously.” Peter cuts him off, tasting copper in his mouth and not knowing when he bit his tongue. He wants to punch this kid. He wants to punch him until he is nothing more than some sort of abstract example of human interaction, blood red and unreal.

Peter clicks his lock screen and turns on his heel. He makes it a block before he has to stop, sit down, tug hands through his hair and breathe, inhale, exhale. Repeat.

0 years, 2 months, 0 weeks, 4 days, 3 hours

He comes to sobbing into Aunt May’s shoulder, unsure of where he is or what happened, but the nightmares sweep his mind with a vengeance that she tries to hold him through.

“Peter, *talk* to me.” She begs him when he calms enough to stutter around his oxygen deprived lungs.

He closes hot, wet eyes and manages, “This is my fault.” and “I’m sorry.”

She regards him silently, like she doesn’t know what to say. Grief is a room with the shades drawn and every time Peter emerges he looks different. New bruises beneath his eyes, broken bones moving beneath his skin. Weight loss, hair flat, skin yellowing and frail. He’s a diluted version of who he was two months ago, like he’s been replaced with something subhuman.

Beneath he’s different in ways that don’t have names. He knows, objectively, that his organs haven’t shifted and his DNA hasn’t been rewired, but he feels as if he’s going through some sort of machine, or perhaps he’s been turned inside out. He wonders if eyes follow him as he walks down the street, *look at this oddity*, they all think, *look at how broken*.

“It’s not.” Aunt May says, “Peter, it’s *not*.”

He leans away from her and refuses to look at her. Ignores her until she gives up, gets up. He listens to her cry in the kitchen all alone.

0 years, 2 months, 2 weeks, 5 days, 0 hours

The *Times* had reported just this morning that crime this quarter was at an all-time high, violent crimes spiking by two percent from the end of last year. Petty crime, the type that Spider-Man more often than not dealt with, was a stat that remained largely unchanged. His AP Statistics teacher from senior year of high school would call the tiny bump statistically insignificant.

Peter is thinking about this with a gun pointed at his head.

“Nice and slow, please.” The man behind him says, edging Peter toward the wall. Peter Parker himself has never been mugged, and despite having stopped dozens of them, he thinks that this man is probably the nicest criminal he’s come into contact with in a long time.

Of course, this does not stop the bone crushing fear that’s seeping, hot and acidic, into the tissue of his stomach, around the muscles in his upper shoulders. As Spider-Man he would have been suave, cracked a joke, taken the thief down with a zinger and a laugh, but he *doesn’t have Spider-Man*.

Peter’s hands, up in surrender, hit the brick of the wall. An obtrusive hand breaches his jacket pocket, and Peter swallows around the feeling of being touched, albeit clinically, by a stranger. He feels lost. He feels weak.

He thinks of Gwen.

The robber withdraws the left of his favorite pair of gloves; Uncle Ben’s sheepskin, thick and soft and worn by callouses that weren’t Peter’s own. It ends up on the ground. Then comes a few gum wrappers, a receipt from lunch (a large cup of coffee and nothing else). Then the pocket is empty.

There’s a creak, maybe the wind, on the fire escape from the building across the street. It sends something *frying* into the back of Peter’s brain, and then, finally, *finally* instinct is taking over.

He turns as the robber is shifting his gun to his other hand in order to search Peter’s other pocket. Pete is quicker, sends an elbow to the other’s forearm, grasps the gun in one of his bare hands, and cracks the butt of it into the thief’s skull.

He stands heaving, and his mugger goes down.

He drops the gun immediately, watches in sickness as blood drips steady from his mugger’s nose.

“Oh my God,” Peter finds himself saying, his hand coming to cup his mouth. He feels bile in his esophagus, burning, burning. “Oh my God.”

His senses are still screaming at him, residual or otherwise, and his heart is a kick drum, speeding up the rhythm in a song he can’t hear.

Something else creaks above him; twice in one night is too much to be a coincidence, but Peter cannot even comprehend that crises over his internal one.

Instead of craning his neck to look at the looming threat above him, he drops to his knees. “Oh my God.” His ice cube fingers find the man’s neck. He scrambles for a pulse, and though he can clearly hear the wheeze of his lungs and see his chest expand (deflate, expand, deflate, expand), he still feels lead in his stomach. “Oh my God.”

“He’s not dead.” Echoes from the fire escape above him, mirthful, lonely. Peter starts so hard he starts backward and barely gets a hand underneath him to keep his balance. He lands too hard, though, and instantly feels pain shoot up his wrist. “You didn’t hit him that hard.”

The figure watching him swings down from his perch; orange light slides over the red in his suit. Peter can’t move.

“Hafta say, kid,” Deadpool says, casual, “You pack one hell of a punch. Surprising.” he adds, an afterthought. “I would say sexy, but, uh, you like like you’re about to puke.”

“Observant.” Peter manages, feeling like he’s on the edge of an out-of-body experience.

But then, his sarcasm startles a laugh out of Deadpool, tentative, unexpected, and Peter is slamming back to Earth.

He’s Spider-Man, and Deadpool is shoving an autograph book in his face, spouting something about being a geek, obsessed, and then blowing Spider-Man up.

He’s Spider-Man, slumped and overtired, eating a taco slumped against the apex of the Chrysler building, sharing company with Deadpool.

He’s Spider-Man and playing up the role of fondly annoyed, going after a monkey hitman, thinking that his life belongs in a heartfelt sitcom and for once not finding any fault with it.

He chokes around it, having forgotten in two and a half months, about the strings that came with the job, how they’d catch up to him, fray him even more.

He realizes he’s panicking, and Deadpool is still talking. “...look, kid, you don’t have to be worried. I mean the fucker on the ground was a bad dude, and you, damn, you just *took him down*. Ever since you-know-who retired I’ve been trolling around the west side, but fuckers like you make me feel useless, y’know. May as well go right back to contracts, no fun in helpin’ people with, like, six black belts in karate, dunno how he did it all the time--”

Get it together, Peter.

He knows he needs to say something. Anything. “Who--”

“Am I?”

“--Are you talking about?” Peter finishes, and then winces. Of course asking about the identity of the masked freak who descended from the fire escape would be the normal thing to do. Peter already knows who Deadpool is, sure, but Deadpool doesn’t know who Peter is.

Deadpool sends him a weird look. “Spider-Man.” He drawls, slow, and Peter tastes the bile finally hit the back of his throat.

Peter sees his chance. His brain is clicking back on, his heart still racing. It helps that his senses have chilled now that he’s realized it was just Deadpool. “You’re Spider-Man?” He manages, still sounding shaky.

On the inside, he gives himself a high-five. Smooth, Parker.

“No?” Deadpool says. “It’s not just me that’s confused, right?” He pauses, as if waiting for an answer and then shakes his head. “Starting over.” He holds a hand out. Peter remembers a second before taking it that Spider-Man was the one who trusted Deadpool, not Peter. “I’m Deadpool, no, not a Spidey knock-off, yes, he copied the suit from *me*. But that’s all irrelevant anyway because Spidey hung up the cape a little while ago.” Peter must have something on his face, because Deadpool withdraws his hand and heaves a put-upon sigh. “Don’t you read the papers? You millenials, I swear. He’s been AWOL since that nasty, uh, *thing* with Greeny.”

Peter’s eyes drop back to his mugger.

His heart, calming now, gives way to memory, and he sinks back to the cold ground. He takes a controlled, trembling breath through his nose and feels like nothing, like a coffee ring in an unwashed mug.

Deadpool is still talking.

“Listen, get up, brush that dirt off ya shoulders, and move on. Cool? You’re cool. You’re good.” Deadpool says, a pitiful attempt at comfort. He holds his hand out again, and this time Peter takes it. He’s not sure he could get up if he tried on his own.

Wrist gripped under Deadpool’s big hand, Peter lets himself be hauled to standing. His glove is thick and tough on Peter’s bare skin, the first foreign contact that Peter has felt in days. “Hey, you really don’t know who I am?”

Peter looks at the hand, steadying him as he relearns how to stand on his two feet. Red wrist, red fingers, eyes behind a red and black mask. “No.” Peter lies. “No, I don’t know who you are.” He says, and it feels like a sickness, feels like some kind of permanent end, and for some reason it doesn’t make him feel any better.

He’s Spider-Man, quips a cut off joke that makes Wade laugh and then give him the finger, and for a moment swinging through the city is the most beautiful, most freeing thing he’s ever done.

“Well,” Deadpool says, flippant, a slow grin burning beneath his mask. “Nice to meet ya.” He says, and Peter doesn’t have air for a response.

Chapter End Notes

edit 1.16.28: i don't know how any of y'all put up with my garbage, so i'm doing an edit for grammar and a lil bit of content.

1. the Kubler-Ross method is not the end-all-be-all body of knowledge centered around grief. That being said, the fic does center around it, but it takes it as an iterative method. Sometimes grief is everything and nothing at once. Sometimes grief is an anger-sadness-anger sequence. There is no cubbyholes for recovery. You'll find that the motif of a dark, closed room is imagery that's brought up a lot, and it's directly

because of this sentiment. Grief is not predictable. Emotions are not numbers or cold logic. Pain is natural and overpowering to each person at different times in different ways.

2. Peter's curriculum is loosely based off the engineering sequence at my university, although i'm pretty sure a GenMol/BioMol Engineering degree is a graduate program, but whatever

Thoughts? Comments are good for the soul :)

cataclysm

Chapter Summary

What do you do when you discover that the world keeps turning? That every inhale exhale repeat is a process independent of everyone else's?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

0 years, 3 months, 0 weeks, 1 day, 15 hours

It's hard to love someone at their lowest. Peter knows this.

He knows this because he finds himself there at least once a day. Gwen thrums in his veins as a low reminder, beating there, tempting him to pull the scene out and replay it.

Her hand reaching out, the crack slam of her neck, her head, her body.

Today he's studying for his second and last bio midterm of the semester, paging through old notes as he goes. He's singularly focused on piecing together his scrambled sheets from a lecture on recombinant DNA when he flips the page and sees her scrawl on the edge.

Hey nerd! She's written, next to a cartoony drawing of an alien wearing his glasses. The drawing is ink-smeared, the words in her handwriting. She must have written in when he wasn't paying attention. This is a new piece of Gwen, which should be impossible, really, being that she's been in the ground for three months (and one day and 15 hours.)

Peter doesn't feel like studying anymore.

He thinks for a moment about making a deal with the alien. *Hey nerd!* It exclaims with a goofy smile beneath his own crooked glasses. Peter wants to make a trade, a *me for her*, one to one ratio.

Instead, he gets up and walks down the stairs. Aunt May is sitting on the couch, drinking tea and reading a book she's read a thousand times.

He sits next to her, and she looks at him a moment and folds her book. She doesn't say anything, though.

He pretends he doesn't feel her watching him, pretends he doesn't feel anything at all. "I can't talk about her." He says.

"It takes time." Aunt May replies slowly. Peter feels a sharp spike of anger, because not only is that a cop-out answer, but it fucking *sucks*. He doesn't want time. He wants her.

He doesn't take it out of his aunt, though, just tucks it behind his curtains and into the dark where

only he knows it's there.

"What are you reading?" He says instead. He thinks about the graphite drawing of an alien wearing his glasses. *Hey nerd*, it says, with her voice, with her smile.

0 years, 3 months, 0 weeks, 4 days, 12 hours

The air is warm and fresh after the earlier rain, so he and Aunt May take a stroll as the sun sets. They pass MJ's house, sitting there silently, and Peter sullenly does not think of Harry, of the fact that he's friendless again.

"Bird watching seems overrated," Aunt May says. "I'd like to choose a different hobby when I retire."

"New York has nothing but pigeons." Peter's eyes are glued to the Watsons' house's shadow, looming and growing in the setting sun. "Do something cooler. Motorcycle stunts." Peter supplies, and Aunt May laughs, something genuine, something that blossoms inside Peter's chest.

It dies as quickly as it comes but he can still feel its memory, for the first time in three long months.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 0 days, 23 hours

"Wikipedia says you're a functioning neurotic with a guilt complex." Deadpool says, collapsing heavily into the seat across from Peter. The cafe isn't crowded, but there are a few long stares.

Peter, who'd been absently tearing his third napkin into little pieces, staring blankly at a glazed world, thinks he misheard. "Wikipedia?" He asks, taken off guard and feeling vulnerable wearing only skin while Wade has layers to protect him.

It hits him, then. Deadpool used to posture about his own identity (Wade Winston Wilson, if you're nasty) as if it was an open invitation for anyone to come for him, a thin declaration of war against the outside world.

But Wade still hides. They all do. Peter, despite knowing the other man for three years now, doesn't know the way his heart beats, the way his skin stretches and shifts underneath the spandex. Peter has never seen his scars.

For a moment he remembers looking into his own mirrored eyepieces and feeling this truth bone deep. They're just children pulling blankets over their heads as if it will stop the monsters. It's comical, naive: like the world deserves to be saved and the people who have the ability to do the saving can dress up in bright colors and call themselves saviors.

He wants to know, for only a moment, who this stranger that sits across from him is, if only to understand who Spider-Man was, who Spider-Man thought he was.

Wade is muttering something about Earth-1281, whatever that means. “I don’t have a Wikipedia page.” Is all Peter manages, his tongue feeling heavy in his own mouth. He tears through the last strands of his napkin and reaches for a fourth.

“My point, *Peter*,” Deadpool says pointedly, and for the first time in three long years Deadpool’s presence sets off Peter’s senses. His breath catches like skin on a rusty nail, a low line level of panic tugging at the base of his sternum. “Is that I’ve done my research.”

Peter swallows. He can deal with this. He’s dealt with worse before. For some reason, though, dealing with Deadpool seems an insurmountable task. He used to skitter between Rhino’s unwieldy, bulky paws and *laugh*. Fuck, his main enemy was a madman with six extra limbs. He once stood his ground against Captain America, told him he was wrong, watched Steve's face harden in surprise.

All of this was, of course, in the shoes of a liar, a murderer.

“I need a favor.” Wade says. This sort of phrase started at least 50% of his drama as Spider-Man. Stark needs a favor. SHIELD needs you to report in. The city is burning, burning and on your shoulders.

“What?” Peter straightens, dropping the two halves of the fourth napkin. The light in the cafe seems brighter. “Me? How do you even know who the hell I am?”

Wade pauses a moment. Peter is conscious of the line he’s walking, the potential bombshell of an answer he’s going to get.

To his surprise, Wade just runs a gloved hand down his masked face. His body language shows exhaustion, his voice a posturing mix of sarcasm and confidence.

It’s like looking into a mirror.

“Why is everyone always like that? ‘Deadpool, you can read?’ ‘Deadpool can you write?’ Are you smarter than a fifth grader shit. ‘Oh, Mr. Pool, how did you find me, it’s not like you’re a *tenured assassin* or anything.’”

Peter opens his mouth. Closes it. The panic buzzes in his palms. “That’s not how tenure works, I don’t think.” He deflects. Spider-Man is creeping into him like a shadow. He’s reverting. He threads his arms through his jacket to cover the exposed skin on his arms.

“I could have a doctorate degree in Moral Ambiguity at the University of Alabama.” Wade says smugly.

"Alabama?"

"Fuck you that place is shady." He defends. “You don’t know me, you don’t know my life.” He adds, sullen and petulant.

“O-kay. Well. I can’t help you.” Peter says quickly. “I’m sorry.” He says, though his isn’t.

He moves to put his scarf on.

“You don’t flinch.” Wade says, eyes piercing into the side of Peter’s head. The barista running the shop calls out a name. Sam or Pam or something. “Masked freak with a reputation for being the scum of the hero underworld meets you in a dark alley. Same mercenary corners you in a seedy coffee shop and you don’t flinch.” The words feel like bugs on his skin, a trickling discomfort. He

wants an excuse to web Deadpool to a wall and leave him there. “Peter Benjamin Parker, sophomore at Empire State, took pictures of a *different* masked freak for four years until his disappearance in late January. You don’t flinch.” Wade has leaned closer, voice low. “Did I get anything wrong?”

Peter flinches.

Wade smiles, the hard edge disappearing, replaced with a smug goofiness. “Good.” He says. Peter takes half a moment to thank the part of Gwen that’s looking out for him that Deadpool didn’t take it a step further and figure out Peter *is* (was) Spider-Man.

“I still don’t see how I can hel--”Peter says.

“I need to see him.”

“Who?”

“Your hairy ass, who do you think? Spider-Man! Your good ol buddy pal, does whatever a spider can.”

“No.” He counters immediately, coldly.

Wade opens his mouth.

Peter sweeps his scarf over his neck. It’s cold for April.

“Hear me out.” Wade says. “I really really need to see him and his fine self, like, yesterday. LOOK OUT,” He hums abruptly and bizarrely. "It's *Spider-Pig*. Whaddya say?"

Peter’s fingers are shaking. They do this a lot, lately.

He very, very briefly entertains the thought of pulling a mask past the crown of his head, down over his lips. It makes sparks shoot down his spine, painful, bright, beautiful, terrible

“No.” He manages, his voice coming out very, very low.

Wade watches him leave.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 0 hours

Peter’s apartment is collecting dust. Aunt May has found it difficult to let Peter out of her sight, and contrary to his past words and actions, her presence in his life lately has been an anchor.

He goes back there to crash after his last final, his mind a whirl of numbers and facts and it’s not until he wakes up gasping, tangled in sheets, does he realize that he forgot.

Something rotten fills his mouth at just the thought of it, and then the thoughts creep in.

How selfish.

How disgusting.

How weak.

It's been three months and for all those agonizing hours he'd felt her in his core. And then today. 150 points. 10 questions. Linear Algebra. A coffee with Tate (not Nate, he discovered) to celebrate afterwards, and she was gone. She was gone.

He hates himself for a moment because he forgot her, and then hates himself for a moment because he cannot forget her at all.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 5 days, 12 hours

"Peter, have you thought about grief counseling?" Aunt May asks him, as she were asking him to clean out the gutters. Matter of fact. Easy. She must have been practicing.

Peter has no interest in grief counseling. "I have no interest in grief counseling." He replies. What would he tell them? *I killed Gwen and it's killing me.*

"It might make you--"

"Aunt May." He cuts with a sharpness he has only recently developed.

Because what do you do?

What do you do when you discover that the world keeps turning? That every inhale-exhale-repeat is a process independent of everyone else's? You move on because the world grants you no other choice.

Spider-Man killed Gwen Stacy and these are the consequences. He has come to the cold realization that the entirety of his adult life has been a fool's errand, that he is made up of dust particles and water and tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that will mean no different.

What do you do when your whole world dissolves and you realize it wasn't the whole world after all?

"I just." May has steel in her backbone. It glints in her eyes. "I just don't know if this is healthy."

Peter quirks an eyebrow at her. The first spark of anger burns in his gut.

"Peter, these...these mood swings, the sadness...you can't even talk about her...Peter, remembering her is not going to ruin her."

She is a pinprick of light inside his heart. That's all he has left. He cannot share her. He can only cup himself around the flame and keep the light for himself.

She adds, "And letting her go does not mean she'll be forgotten." This line is shaky. It's hard for May to say.

Loss isn't an event. It's not a singularity. It happens again and again and again, and every morning when Peter wakes up and every night when he goes to bed and every time he takes a breath and every--

“I’m worried about you.” May says.

“Jesus, May.” He bites, finally, hot and cold at the same time. “What did you expect?”

“I know that this is not easy, but Peter, *please* --”

He blinks and finds no tears, for once. His throat is dry. His hands shake. “I’m sorry.” He says, hollowly, and he’s not sure he even means it anymore.

He leaves.

“Peter!” She calls after him, but he doesn’t turn.

He feels the burn of it.

The heat death of his universe started with the crack of a spine.

In the west, the sun starts to set. A car drives down the road. A phone rings. The earth turns.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 6 days, 0 hours

“What do you want.” It’s not a question.

Deadpool whirls. “Holy.” He’s choking on whatever he was eating. Judging by the Taco Bell wrappers littering the roof, probably the new flavor of Doritos Locos Tacos. “Holy *fucking* shit.”

Peter takes a long breath through his nose.

This was a bad idea.

Deadpool is still flailing, cussing. Peter crosses his arms beneath his long-sleeve t-shirt. It’s too hot for it, but he didn’t have a lot of options.

“How did you--why did you---what?” Deadpool is babbling. He does this, Peter knows. Take him by surprise and he’ll try to cover the fact he was actually taken off guard by overabundant hyperbole.

He pulls himself together. Wagging his gloved fingers, dusted with fake cheese, he croons, “Hey baby.”

It’s like being kicked in the stomach.

This was a bad idea.

He has no webs, no real suit, no motivation, no life force behind this. He doesn’t let Deadpool get another word in. He drops to the shadows, disappears.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 6 days, 1 hour

The thing about school is that it was his only distraction. He never cared for it past the fact that it gave him something to latch on, one last thing to not let go. Peter went through the motions.

Now he's got nothing to do. Ideally he'd be heading into an internship, but he'd skipped his third interview at a big Pharma company upstate and lost any motivation he had to make it better before offers were sent out in early February.

He tells himself that he's hanging off the side of a four-story walk-up in the heart of Brooklyn wearing his old wrestling mask probably just because he's having a weird week, and it doesn't mean anything. Old habits.

He wonders, idly, if it means anything that annoying, incessant Wade Wilson was the one he put the mask on for. It was idle curiosity and leftover need, he thinks. Probably.

It's a little after ten and a Monday in early May, so most kids still have school tomorrow morning and the neighborhood is quiet. Unfortunately, whoever owns this apartment is doing some sort of illicit thing, because there is a bowl full of suspicious looking meat on the fire escape next to the window Spider is perched above.

Peter is still thinking about Wade when the window cracks open, and a little boy crawls out. The kid is maybe nine at the most. He's scrawny, mouse-headed, and his eyes are too big for his body. The kid doesn't notice Peter at first, and Peter, telling himself he's not in his right mind and has an excuse, doesn't move. If he's quiet enough, maybe the kid will be too unobservant to notice the adult crouched two short feet diagonally from his head.

As Peter watches, the kid doles out a handful of dusty chicken nuggets from his pocket into the bowl.

There's a minute or so of squirming and silence, and then a small, emaciated cat comes hobbling up the top step, pushing its face into the kid's hand and licking the meat remnants it finds there. The cat, gray and lithe and probably beautiful in a past life, has fur matted with blood on one side, and hobbles a little. It chews thoughtfully at the old chicken nuggets for a moment, while the little boy pets it, short fingers combing over the knobs in its spine, the coarse fur on its flank. There's something soft in his brown eyes.

And then, here's the kicker, three more cats come up the stairs.

These newcomers are small, *much* smaller than the first gray one, each spotted white black and gray. They tumble over each other, mewling hungrily, getting the small beans of their feet caught in the floor. The boy lets out a soft gasp of surprise, at either that fact that all these little ones made it up three flights of steep metal steps or that they're here at all.

Peter guesses the latter.

The boy scrambles backward as one kitten starts kneading his thigh. "Ow!" He protests in a whisper, gently removing the kitten, who is now mewling because she's stuck in the leg of his pants. "Mjolnir, did you have kittens?" He asks at the older, tired cat. Peter takes a moment to feel irrationally proud of this strange little boy for the name because not only is Mjolnir *awesome* (Peter had touched it, once), but when Thor calls it in the heat of battle it sounds a hell of a lot like "mew mew" which is the exact noise these kittens are making.

"Oh." The boy says. "They're not yours." The kid is eight years old and already sounds like he gets

the irony; the stray kittens are being taken care of by a stray that needs taken care of. There's a metaphor in there somewhere, but Peter is afraid to touch it, and doesn't.

"Aw man." The boy whines. "Mjolnir, mommy is gonna find out now. I dunno how to feed you all."

Maybe it's best if his mother does find out. Dinosaur shaped chicken nuggets are probably not within a kitten's balanced diet.

The boy lets out a miserable sound, and after a moment, picks his head up and the light catches water in his eyes. Peter recognizes something terrible lonely in his expression, and it tugs him, physically, like an emotional spidey sense.

"Milk." He says. The boy starts hard and whirls, letting out a squeak. Several of the kittens growl pitifully at the surprise. "Those kittens are probably too young for solid food like Mjolnir's eating. Usually they drink their mom's milk but I'm not sure that's an option."

The boy is staring, agape. He doesn't look scared though. Just surprised.

Peter crawls down a few feet, plants his sneakers, and swings down from the upper floor's landing to look at the boy upside down. "What's your name?" Peter asks.

"I, um, Henry." The boy says. His eyes are wide, very wide. Brown, still watery.

"Henry, what kind of milk do you drink? Thicker milk? Or thinner stuff?"

Henry looks confused. Peter doesn't have the time to explain the fat skimming techniques of milk manufacturing, but apparently the kid is clever enough already. "Mommy drinks milk in the morning in her coffee."

Ah, Half and Half. "Okay Henry, do you want to go grab a bowl and that milk then?" Peter asks softly. "We can try half milk and half chicken for the kittens."

Henry pauses a moment and then nods, slowly. He gets to his feet.

Then, in a whisper with one small hand on the sill, he asks, "You won't tell, will you?"

Spidey's voice catches. "No." He says. One of the kittens has caught sight of him and is trying to climb the bars, but there's no purchase, no horizontal balance, so it loses its balance fast.

Spider-Man goes first to his webshooters and then his stomach *drops* because he doesn't have them, he doesn't need them, and he's been referring to himself as Spider-Man for easily the last five minutes.

He lands hard on the platform below him. The kitten had been grabbed by the back of its neck by another one's teeth and steadied. Peter can only look at it with a sick sense of betrayal, shock.

Henry comes back loudly. He's spilled Half and Half down his night shirt, but he's grinning again.

He sets the bowl down and the kittens nudge in for a drink, grumbling and mewling at one another. Peter blinks back the sting in his eye just as Henry opens his mouth. Closes it.

"I thought you were gone." The boy says, voice calm and firm, the way a child gets when he loses something, indignant, afraid. "Are you back?"

His chest curdles inside him. There may still be a part of him (indignant, afraid) that's clinging to

the original motivation behind Spider-Man. To make a kid smile. To stop the pain, the fear.

Once, when Peter had crawled into bed at 4 AM bruised and worse for wear, Gwen had huffed a sleepy sigh and rolled onto his chest. It was December, and he was cold and had bruised a rib, so her undeniable weight and warmth shook the breath from his core. She'd said, her lips brushing over his sternum. "Pete, you're the stupidest person I've ever met." He felt her words, her breath in between the layers of his skin and muscle. "But you're the bravest person I've ever met."

He'd told her he loved her and she'd smiled against the skin over his heart.

Henry takes a step back. It's been a long time since anyone has spoken. "Unless..." Henry begins slowly, the edge to his voice gone. "Unless." His tone makes Peter feel like he's stepped on a nail.

Henry opens his mouth, wails. "MOM!"

Fuck.

What are you doing.

"Mom!" Henry is still yelling, even as Peter scrambles back up the wall, guilty and wronged and horrified.

Distantly, he hears a sleepy, confused. "Henry?" And he vaults himself over the edge of the building and onto the roof. "Henry, what's wrong?"

He catches the words *stranger* and *like Spider-Man* before he can't take it anymore and slinks away, the mewling cries of kittens fading to the sounds of the city.

0 years, 3 months, 2 weeks, 7 days, 12 hours

Someone is knocking. It might be Aunt May.

Peter hasn't slept, the skin around his eyes feels crusty and stings. The room is dark, every light off, every door closed, all the windows shut.

"Peter." She says, from the other side of the door. She knocks again.

He pulls fingers through his hair. Steeples his forehead on his palms. Digs his elbows into the kitchen counter.

"Pete!" She sounds irritated.

He doesn't answer.

0 years, 4 months, 0 days

Unknown Number:

Yo

Petey boy

Peter:

Who is this?

Unknown Number:

Imfao

who do u think

Peter:

Judging by the chat-speak?

I'm busy, sorry.

Unknown Number :

why am i not surprised ur a grammar nazi

anyway

what gives?

thought we were bros

bosom buddies

Brothas from different mothas

Cole and Dylan Sprouse from The Suite Life of Zach and Cody (2005)

Peter:

This is not my problem.

If you need to talk to SM, YOU find him.

Deadpool:

Bruh

thats what im trying 2 do

Deadpool

Pete?

Peter:

I can't help you.

I'm sorry.

I wish I could.

Deadpool

Hate 2 break character and be serious but

I don't rlly believe you

"I wish i could"

Peter:

I don't owe you anything.

Deadpool:

Aww petey im flattered

<3<3<3

werent u and webhead buds?

hes a private dude

well, he never let ME take his pictures

if you know what i mean

Peter:

Stop.

Deadpool:

touchy

did u two break up?

Peter:

Stop.

Deadpool:

aw man dw ur out of his league

plus this way there's more for me

oops mom's always telling me to work on my sensitivity

Peter:

Deadpool, please.

Just stop.

Can we argue about this later?

Just not today.

Anyway, the subway just got to my stop.

Deadpool:

where ya headed

Peter:

Calvary Cemetery

Chapter End Notes

update 7.16.18

eye

Chapter Summary

He doesn't remember when he started to care about Deadpool, but death is a trigger, any death. He'd watched every agonizing second of life leach from Gwen's body. He'd watched it and five months later he still feels those milliseconds in his own bloodstream.

Chapter Notes

a bit of gore in this one, nothing too gross

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 4 months, 1 week, 2 days

Peter gets a job.

It's nothing abnormal or astronomical or challenging, but it puts money in his pocket. He stocks shelves. Candy is in aisle two, yes, gum is with the candy. Sir, you can't eat that here.

He's got an apartment in New York City to maintain and an education to pursue and they aren't waiting for him like he wants them to. Just like it was with school, he cannot let everything he built fall apart around him. It's not self-preservation, nor any belief of Gwen's wishes for Peter's life without her. He's fooling himself into moving on, or at least trying to.

At Empire State, he scraped by at a biweekly job manning the library circulation desk, where he was always grumpy, always doing his homework, and never helpful. He used to get free pizza at Chino's East in Lower Manhattan, free take-out at Shang Hau's up north and free gyros from almost half the stands in the city. He has to budget more, now that he's not exploiting grateful people for his own personal gain.

I'm sorry, we don't sell bullets, sir, and no I don't know who does.

He shares the graveyard shift with Cassie, who snaps her gum and doesn't like speaking to him. She's rude to the customers. She gets fired four days after he starts for stealing trashy magazines and setting them on fire outside the front door. Strangely, Peter wishes her well, and she smiles at him.

After that he works three doubles in a row with Rahid, who chats *incessantly*. He's a first gen American working nights at the store and mornings at the quantum mechanics research lab at Empire State. He's halfway through his dissertation. He has three younger sisters. He likes *Jurassic*

Park. He's a fucking Pisces.

Peter meets Don, a pale gray old man who buys a pack of cigarettes at 9:00 PM every night and asks Peter to tell a joke. Peter tells the lamest ones he knows, the orange-you-glad-I-didn't-say-banana type and Don always laughs, until one day he comes in wearing Vietnam dress blues and doesn't speak a damn word, not even to ask for the smokes.

It makes something open up inside Peter, and he wonders if this is what healing feels like: being able to feel something for someone other than the person you lost. It's bizarre--Don is a stranger--but astonishing all the same.

0 years, 4 months, 2 weeks, 4 days

"Three-hundred! Can you believe that? The damn thing better be dipped in gold and coated with diamonds for three hundred dollars."

Over the buzz line on the phone, Aunt May wonders, "Did you call me just to complain?"

"I'm a poor college student Aunt May! This is injustice!" He's grinning. It's a Good Day. He doesn't think that, through all this terrible sadness, Gwen would fault him for the days he smiles.

"You could give up on school and work night shifts at the corner store for the rest of your life." May teases.

"Don't even joke. You'd kill me."

"May in the kitchen with the candlestick."

He snorts, "I can probably find a copy online."

"Peter!" She replies, scandalized but probably faking it. "Isn't that illegal?"

"Piracy. It's a crime." He snickers.

"I won't bail you out of jail."

Peter declares, "I'm not paying three hundred dollars for a Genetics textbook. I'm just not."

0 years, 4 months, 3 weeks, 0 days

The insomnia is getting a little...old.

One night when he can't sleep, when he's almost trembling with the weight of the atmosphere running along the ridges of his ribs, he does a little research. He finds nothing new--his inability to sleep is a nasty side effect of a much greater demon that he doesn't quite want to admit to.

Peter sits back in his chair and listens to the silence. As time wears on, it grates against him, the darkness heavy, until he can't do anything but dissolve beneath his senses. Someone is robbing the CVS six blocks south of him. Somebody's standing on the Brooklyn Bridge.

Peter is making the conscious choice that these people do not need him. He is making the conscious decision that no one had ever asked for his help, so he's choosing himself, or at least the shreds of himself he has left.

It feels excruciatingly selfish.

He wipes hands down his face, spends an hour clicking through those old pictures he said he'd never look at again, zooming in and out, taking Gwen apart into pixels. Peter reminds himself of the little things he's forgotten, like the smoothness of the skin of her jaw, the exact blue color of her eyes as she laughed.

He's tapping his fingers idly against his desk, knee bobbing up and down in an effort to suppress the jumping in his chest.

Peter draws breath in through his nose, and then jolts up from the chair, jerking around his room for tennis shoes, old shorts, an Empire State College of Engineering t-shirt. He scoops his keys, leaves his phone on the charger, and by the time he hits street level his feet are already quickening beneath him.

He starts out at a brutal pace, lungs catching in his throat, every slap of his own feet against the pavement jarring and loud. He digs in with the balls of his feet, widens his gait, and doesn't hold back his strength. It's there, coiled and unused, beneath his skin, dead sparks in the tight muscles of his calves.

Peter closes his eyes at the feeling of wind on his face.

By the time he feels the burn of his sprint, he's in a neighborhood he doesn't recognize from the street. Peter slows to a jog, his body singing beneath the exercise. A deep, dark part of him wants to swing, to coil his arms and clench his abdominals and stretch every piece of himself to the limit. Lift a car. Bruise up his knuckles.

Spider-Man was raw power and zingers; he never denied how good that all felt to scrawny, nerdy, underappreciated Peter Parker. Maybe that was the selfish part. He's not sure anymore.

He slows to a stop.

He feels suddenly, inscrutably tired.

0 years, 4 months, 3 weeks, 4 days

Most of what Peter finds online say pretty much the same things—that holidays are tough, that celebration drives the hurt in deeper, that grief colors things you used to love dimmer, grayer, uglier.

Gwen liked the fireworks that fizzed out at the end, the big boomers, the purple ones.

Peter sits on the roof of his apartment building and lets the trash heat smell of July in New York City sink into his skin. This is undeniably *home*—the orange sky, the distant sound of fireworks, the breeze, the long drone of an ambulance down below—but it squeezes his chest all the same.

0 years, 4 months, 3 weeks, 6 days

“Is this your aunt?” Rahid asks, though Peter doesn’t recall ever being able to get two words into the conversation in the first place let alone speak about May.

“Yeah, actually--”

“She looks nothing like you Peter Parker, much prettier.” Rahid flashes a white-toothed grin at May, who is standing at the automatic door.

“Thank you, young man.” She smiles and it doesn’t reach her eyes.

Peter says, “Just a sec, May. Gotta clock out.”

He darts to the back and runs a few fingers through his hair. He’s exhausted. Today is a Bad Day. He feels it in his bones.

When he returns, Rahid is chewing May’s ear off. Peter offers her his arm. He interrupts, “Shall we?”

She takes his arm, a tentative smile sharpening her laugh lines. “Have a good evening, Rahid.” She says.

Rahid grins. “I will, Mrs. Parker.” He replies as they leave.

They’re quiet together for a long while, until Peter asks about her day and she returns the question. It’s small talk; neither of them in the mood to return to the playful banter they’d once been so comfortable in. Peter is back to his apartment full time, living off boiled eggs and old toast, and he spends evenings in the quiet, in the dark, watching the cars below.

Peter has a reservation, so they’re seated right away.

“Peter Parker.” May leans forward. “Where on earth have you taken me?”

They’re in an Italian restaurant that’s been owned and operated by the same surly family for half a century. It’s ritzy, dark, and expensive enough to have a sommelier who brings out two glasses of Chardonnay and doesn’t card Peter, who is underage for another four months.

He lifts the glass and she taps hers against his, their toast unspoken.

“You better damn well order the spaghetti,” He gestures to the sign that proclaims the restaurant’s many accomplishments, including NYC’s Best Spaghetti 2014.

May laughs. “Why here?” She asks.

There’s a lot of reasons. He wonders if she sees the apology in it, wonders if it will ever be enough. Instead he just shrugs, says, “Friend recommended it.”

Immediately, he winces internally.

“A friend?” May asks, the crook of her lip widening. “Peter...?” Her sentence is open because she wants him to fill it.

This is not new. May has been on his back about his friends since he came home crying one too many times in the first grade. #GetPeterSomeFriends2005 became #GetPeterSomeFriends2006 which turned into #GetPeterSomeFriends2007 and et cetera until Harry, and they all know how well that turned out.

Peter rolls his eyes and snatches his glass. Widely, he sticks his nose in it. “Hmmm.” He says, swirling it around. “Woodsy.” He takes a tiny sip, doesn’t even get enough to taste it. “Undertones of...” He pauses, dramatically. “Mulch?”

“Peter!” May scolds, but one of her hands is covering her mouth and she’s kind of giggling. “I’m serious.” She’s still laughing.

He cocks a brow. “So am I.” Peter tilts his glass at her and then can’t think of anything to say. The joke folds beneath him like splintering wood. “He’s nobody, May. I vaguely know him from, like, a high school project, and he started annoying me again about a month or so ago.”

The ‘friend’ in question’s exact text message had been, “u seem grumpier than normal” sent at 4:23 AM and then “lol wyd send pics” and then added “(of Spidey)”. When Peter had told him to fuck off, Wade had started texting him about spaghetti, so... here they are.

Jesus, he needs to change his number.

May seems to accept his lie of an answer for now. They order. The food comes. It’s still a Bad Day.

They share a piece of triple decker chocolate cake for dessert and each get a flute of champagne, and this time May holds up her glass for a toast before Peter can.

“To Ben, my love.” She says, voice steady and strong and shaved raw. “Happy Birthday.”

0 years, 5 months, 0 weeks, 0 days

Today is stretchingly beautiful. The sky is oil painting blue, streaked with clouds. Summer buzzes in full heat; it smells like asphalt and trash and grass, even all the way out here.

Peter’s hand is still slick with chlorophyll from the rose he’d laid at the base of her stone, fingers still stinging with the way he’d traced her name.

Across the cemetery, May lays her own rose and murmurs something to Uncle Ben. Peter joins her a moment later.

This isn’t logical, he knows. Ben is bones in the dirt now and Gwen will follow soon, but the thought of that *revolts* even his own logical mind, so he visits once a month. With Ben’s birthday yesterday, and the holiday just before that, it seemed even more important this month.

Aunt May has her head bowed and Peter doesn't want to listen in, so he picks a bench a few plots over and sits down, lets the wind ruffle through his hair and take with it the smell of hot, wet dirt and fresh flowers.

Later, after she finishes up with Ben, Aunt May sits next to Peter tentatively, breathing in through her nose in controlled, deep breaths. He opens his arms and she hesitates, a second, two, three, (much too long) before sliding across the bench and accepting the comfort.

May rests her head in the crook of his neck and says, "Some days I forget that he's gone."

He looks past her to the fresh rose and blinks, thumbs the fragile bone at the apex of her shoulder in an attempt to comfort. She continues, "Some days that's all I remember."

He remembers Uncle Ben's death, of course he does. Ben was a lot of things--stubborn, intelligent, incredible--and he was Peter's father in most of the ways that counted. Ben talked to him about girls, how to clean the gutters, how to apologize. He thinks for a flashing second, that everything he'd done in response--Spider-Man, the heroics, the powers, the mask--was some sort of emotional response, some sort of attempt not to deal with the blame, the guilt, the loss.

He never *really* dealt with Uncle Ben's death, just let it fade until he had bigger enemies to worry about, until the bruises were physical instead of implied. The thought knocks the breath out of him, because he's *dealing* now, and he wonders how he'd ever missed this going on in Aunt May. Grief is a plaster that fills different molds; it stays fundamentally the same despite being shaded in different contexts or formed by different circumstances.

He'd lost a father and May had lost a husband and the love of her life.

"I think of him and I smile, now." She says. "But sometimes..." May trails off. Laughs once. "Four years and you'd think it would be easier, that I would be able to declare myself officially Moved On." Peter is not sure whether May is trying to tell him something or if she just wants to talk. He listens anyway. "Time doesn't always work like that. Sometimes it was yesterday when I got that call. Yesterday when he was still alive. Just the other day I was laughing and laughing with Margaret because he never, oh Peter, he *never* wanted to take the Christmas lights down no matter how much I nagged. He wanted them up all year."

Peter lets out a soft breath through his nose. "May, it's my back, my eyes, these old knees." He quotes, his voice low and soft and nothing like his Uncle's.

May laughs. She laughs until her voice squeaks and Peter has to hold her tighter. "I loved him." She says wetly. "I loved him and I'm glad that we got the time we had."

He wonders if this is what healing is: laughing and crying in the same breath, opening up the hurt inside you until it reads like a book, the good and the bad and the terribly beautiful spread out, glossy, all at once.

At that, Peter shakes his head.

Tip of the iceberg, and all that.

0 years, 5 months, 2 weeks, 1 day

"Come to your window." Deadpool says. Peter doesn't recall picking up the phone. He's running

on fifty hours. “I have a boom box. I’m going to woo you.”

Peter grunts.

There’s a loud crash from his bedroom. “Oops,” Deadpool says in Peter’s ear and across the room.

Peter hangs up on him. He doesn’t ask how Deadpool figured out where he lived, just closes his eyes for a moment and takes a long breath in. His heart beats against his temples.

He stands up quietly and crosses the room. Deadpool is in a heap near his dresser, bleeding all over the floor and grumbling, every other word a cuss.

“You’re not...um” Peter is *alarmed* at how quickly his throat is thickening. “You’re not...are you going...”

“To kick the bucket? Bite the bullet? Do a trust fall into Death’s arms?” Wade smirks. “Nah. Just going to bleed on your floor for a minute or two. Or six. Twelve hours, max.”

Peter has crossed the room and doesn’t remember how he got there. The situation is both second nature and terrifyingly foreign. “I’d...I’d really rather you not.” He’s stumbling over his words, a sign of the exhaustion or the anxiety, either or.

He turns abruptly and paces into the bathroom to retrieve his industrial first aid kit. He’s not sure if it will even help. From the bathroom, he calls, “What made you come here?”

“Sympathy points.” Wade returns quickly, almost too quickly, which means it’s a deflection. It occurs to him that maybe Peter should ask *why* Deadpool wants so badly to see Spider-Man. No one else does. (He’s gotten like, a few, a *few* calls from Stark but now is not the time to think about those.)

“You planning on sawing off a limb sometime soon?” Wade nods at the giant white tub as Peter reenters the bedroom.

He just shrugs.

“This isn’t really necessary, you know. I’ll heal by tomorrow morning.” Wade says, his voice almost small, almost sincere.

Peter gives him a look.

“Okay, damn, ya bully.” Wade says, in a way that means he’s secretly pleased. “No wonder you and Spidey were such bros, you’re the bitch face twins.”

Deadpool has propped himself up so he’s leaning with his back against the bedframe, his legs sprawled across the carpet. His suit is torn into clinging shards that stretch over raw muscle and decimated skin. Half his mask is missing.

Wade has blue eyes.

Peter ignores them and makes an impatient gesture for Wade’s arm, which is given without much of a fuss. Peter keeps his head down and wraps gauze around a deep laceration that’s oozing dark scarlet blood. It looks bad. It looks painful. Peter doesn’t ask, because he already knows that stitches do more harm than good for Wade.

He skims his fingers downward from the first wound and wraps his thumb and forefinger around

Wade's wrist. With his other hand, without warning, he *jerks* Wade's broken middle finger so it'll set right.

"Aw *fuck!*" Deadpool exclaims on a heated outpouring of breath. "Jesus on a quesadilla!"

He sets about to splinting the damaged finger, but it's slick with blood and still very mangled. It's disgusting. The skin beneath Peter's other hand at Wade's wrist is rough with scar tissue, pink. Underneath, the rounded jut of bone is surprisingly fragile and small.

Peter swallows and sits back on his heels. "What happened?" He asks, gesturing at the raw meat of Wade's thigh, which is weakly pulsing blood up and out around a piece of thick metal that had evidently broken off. There's not much skin showing beneath the hole in the suit except for a thin ring around the wound.

Deadpool huffs, "You should see the other guy."

Peter assesses the damage. On a human being this kind of wound would probably result in enough nerve damage that walking again would be a miracle. It's also less than an inch shy of his femoral artery. Even a nick and Wade will bleed out slow.

Peter grays at the thought. He can't remember the last time he brushed his teeth; his mouth tastes sour, gritty. Panic pushes against him. He doesn't remember when he started to care about Deadpool, but death is a trigger, any death. He'd watched every agonizing second of life leach from Gwen's body. He'd watched it and five months later he still feels those milliseconds in his own bloodstream.

"What other guy?" Peter asks, dazed, slightly woozy.

Deadpool shifts, grunting, and shrugs. "Wacko in Midtown, must be Tuesday."

"Any wacko in particular?"

"State secret." Wade says with a flutter of his fingers. "I think I'm going to have to work that one out of my own." He adds, nodding at Peter's hands, which are still hovering awkwardly near Wade's thigh and the gigantic spearhead or whatever that's still lodged in it. "There's no way you're gonna get that sucker out without killing me." Deadpool laughs. Something is funny. "I don't really want to die right now."

Peter withdraws his hands, works his jaw, feels like he's been slapped. "You'd come back." He says, and turns to pick charred pieces of uniform from Wade's chest; skin had healed over the pieces, and ripping them out means reopening old wounds.

"Ah yes, the fabulous inculpability of immortality." His voice is so bitter that Peter bites his lip in surprise. "Death is wasted on me." He tips his head back, his throat a long, ragged line in the semi-darkness.

Wade is conspicuously quiet after that, his body a topographical map of old horrors beneath Peter's nimble fingertips. He wonders how much agony it would be to wear his pain as scars on his skin. He wonders what kind of fundamental loss Wade has had to endure, wonders what it would feel like to be forced to shoulder every darkness until it dissolved into his skin.

It strikes him that the rest of the world gets to hide their terrors in the darkness of their own minds, but Wade doesn't; Wade wears his on every curve of skin, every organic slope of muscle, every knock of bone. As Peter works an embedded piece of gravel out of the thick skin over Wade's sternum, it occurs to Peter that he doesn't blame him at all for retreating beneath a suit.

A small, irritated part of him points out what a double fucking standard that is, but considering all the blood and the fact that Peter is conspicuously Not Going There, he refuses to think about Gwen, about Spider-Man, about himself.

"Why did you come here?" Peter finally asks again. Trust is not an easy thing; Spider-Man had Wade's every adoration, but not necessarily his trust.

"I'm manipulating you into giving me what I want." Deadpool says bluntly, enough to startle a harsh laugh out of Peter.

He tosses a bloodied piece of gauze toward the kit and asks, "And what is it that you actually want?"

Wade shrugs in his peripheral vision. "I'm a fly by the seat of my pants kinda guy. Call it a Spidey sense."

Peter forces himself not to look at Wade, to keep breathing, act normal, you're fine, it's fine.

"Are you threatening me?" He asks finally, darkly. He thinks suddenly and desperately of Gwen, of what happens when the mask turns transparent and the man is exposed.

"Dude." Wade scoffs. "Yeah. No. Maybe? I'm not sure what I'm doing. Ever. Just today I was following Barton on patrol--"

"Hawkeye takes patrols?"

"Yes, someone has to pick up the slack around here since You Know Who did god knows what. Anyway, Barton, patrol, he wanted me to go away, I wanted to annoy him, then Otto Octopus--"

"Octavias."

"--starts being his damn Grade D villain self with a side of extra cranky because there are no bants with his fave, and thirty minutes later there's half a damn tentacle in my leg and I'm bleeding out on the fire escape of Nerd Number 1." Wade picks his head up. "If you wanna hear God laugh, tell him your plans, s'what I say."

Peter swallows heavily. "Did anyone get hurt? With Doc Ock?" *Your fault your fault your fault, quitter.*

"Nah, just some structural damage that will conveniently get ignored until the government decides they wanna be mad at somebody, and the ensuing angst fest will be a good two and a half hours of manpain and bickering. 90% fresh on Rotten Tomatoes."

Peter has stopped listening. He's picking up the first aid kit and placing it on his dresser. He's tugging the blinds down. *Your fault your fault your fault your*

"You should be a nurse." Wade decides suddenly, jerking Peter from his thoughts. He'd been hyper aware of the squish of blood between his fingertips, the red-meat copper smell of it, how it felt like Gwen's, like Ben's, like that woman on the pier, or those kids in the cellar, or the man slumped on a roof in the warehouse district.

"I'm a genetics major." Peter replies.

"Huh." Wade says slowly, like he's thinking very deeply about something. "Genetics like DNA, like *mutations*, like mutants, like Weapon X shit, like being bit by a radioactive arthropod and

developing super powers?”

Peter freezes. Looks Wade in the eye for the first time in two years of knowing him. “Yeah.” He replies slowly. “Kind of.”

“Cool.” Wade decides. “How’d you get so good at this?” He asks, wagging his splinted finger in Peter’s face.

Peter looks him in the eye again. Catalogues the asymmetrical pattern of his scars, the flakes of skin, the redness around the rims of his eyes.

Peter is covered in another person’s blood, symbolically and now very literally, running on fifty hours without sleep, but there’s still a small shred of self-preservation that wants to throw open his carefully bricked over windows and let the light in.

So he lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Practice.” He replies.

The eye contact breaks when he turns.

“Huh.” Wade says slowly, at the back of his head.

Chapter End Notes

1. i understand this is not how a sommelier works
2. i had to break this chapter in half so I wasn't unloading 13k worth of this angst crap on you
3. sorry? i guess? this chapter fought me and does not like me.
updated 7.16.18

bend

Chapter Summary

“Pete, do you understand me?” Her voice is rising. Panic? Anger? Peter can’t tell. “I don’t know how to help you anymore. I can’t--” She sighs, long and world-weary. Peter knows where she’s going, though she has only tried to go there once before. “It’s been six months since she died--”

“Since I killed her.” He corrects, whip fast and without thinking. The window wavers wetly in his vision.

This is the first time he’s spoken those words aloud.

Chapter Notes

Holy roofies, Batman! A 7k chapter!

There are....(very very minor) harry potter spoilers....in this....

Also, i suppose i don’t have to warn for this really considering the whole rest of the fic, but the timeline hits six months somewhere in this chapter and it’s not particularly pretty, but you’re not here for pretty, so carry on, i guess. But please do heed the tags-- I added a few, and this one was particularly difficult to write (but mostly because i hate it like a lot) .

Anyway, if i had to sum this whole chapter up in a few words, i would probably call it “a breaking point.”

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 5 months, 2 weeks, 3 days

Peter has an industrial soap for this kind of thing, but for some reason even with the added elbow grease the stain isn’t coming out of his carpeting. For some reason he thinks he can still smell it. It seeps into his pores.

Peter doesn’t remember a lot about the few hours after Gwen’s death.

As he scrubs, he remembers this: the blood on his arm that had transferred from her hair to his suit to his skin, the way he couldn’t scrub it away. If he closes his eyes he can still see it pinkining in the shower water, darkening as it swirled around the drain. He wonders bizarrely if that’s what it means to be human. Made up of cells, she was a tightly sewn cut of meat that ran on red blood and oxygen, piloted by cosmically individual gray matter. Gwen simplified was her blood type, skin color, hair color, height, weight, age, cell count. Chemicals, ash, dust. Matter.

Peter’s fingers bite into the suds on the rag he’s using. He’s been scrubbing at the bloodstain on his floor for nearly fifteen minutes now and it’s not coming out. This substance that’s so wholly

human and yet wholly inhuman. Gwen simplified was wanderlust, determination. She was ticklish, a Biology major, and hated green beans.

Abruptly, he stops, realizing this kind of thinking is going to end up undoing any kind of sanity he's worked to build. Peter stands, wiping wet hands on his shorts and stares at the stain. Wet, it looks like a deeper rust, like mud almost. In Peter's mind he can see thickening clots welling over the hot steel in Wade's leg, so he has to turn, bile tickling the upper edge of his stomach.

It's high noon but Peter crawls into bed hesitantly, tossing an old blanket over the sticky stain for now. He'll deal with it later. For now, he sprawls sideways over the bed, his feet hanging off, and feels around underneath the wooden top of his side table to a false pocket he's fashioned out of duct tape. From the pocket he withdraws the thin burner phone SHIELD had given him a little over three years ago. It was a Stark prototype that never hit the markets, and Peter is one of only a handful of special people that possess it.

He removed virtually every functionality of the phone when he'd first gotten it. He'd been midway through his junior year of high school and still stuck to things on accident; he didn't need to make his secret identity any more obvious to those who were looking (i.e. SHIELD). Now, GPS and internet disabled, SIM card modified, the phone is little more than a burner that can text with emojis.

He pauses a moment, still smelling blood, and turns it on with a sigh. Peter is conscious that this is a steep canyon he's edging toward, but it has to be done. The media has hardly reported on the incident and all Peter has is what Deadpool told him while bleeding profusely on his floor.

All Peter can think of is losing Gwen and the decisions that led him there.

So he turns on the phone.

He gets a flood of messages, but it's nowhere near as bad as when he first checked it. Most people who wondered where Spidey went have taken his silence as a loud-and-clear answer. Peter's not sure if people really know what happened that night in the clock tower, but he's sure they get the gist. The Green Goblin was stopped but Spider-Man was sacrificed in the process.

He checks Stark's messages first; they include two missed calls and one voicemail, both of which he deletes. The texts themselves are musings that get increasingly more manipulative as they get newer, ranging from "Cap is cranky again, think he misses you" to texts that immediately afterward are rescinded in the fashion of "fuck that was shitty of me." It's typical Tony.

Carol has sent him one, a quick "thinking of you." that fucks him up for six minutes or so. Felicia sent something similar yet far less polite. She's always been weirdly interested in Spider-Man. He deletes them all.

Steve never texts him anything. Peter has checked the phone three times since burning the mask and Cap, who isn't much of a texter in the first place, has never said anything apart from the voicemail he sent the morning after Gwen's funeral.

Today, however, there are two texts:

Captain Rogers

Ock in Midtown. There was a security breach at the Raft. Not sure why, but only Ock got out. Barton/DP/SW took care of him. 12 hurt, but they're all going to make it.

Captain Rogers

We're looking into it.

Peter reads the two messages twice and then deletes them, too. The last text sounds like a dismissal, but Peter can hear the unspoken *we've got this we can handle it we're going to be okay*. His stomach is curdling inside him. The room is *saturated* with the smell of blood.

Peter looks up at the ceiling in his bedroom as a caged animal. Spider-Man trapped him to this guilt from every direction. Guilt for trying and failing. Guilt for not trying at all.

Gwen is *dead*, he thinks. Gwen is gone and he's not sure what he should be doing, what he should have done. The mask was suffocating, but it was also his responsibility.

"Dammit, Parker." He whispers to himself, thumbing open the calling function and dialing his voicemail.

He has one saved voicemail, sent five months and two weeks ago.

"Son," Steve says in his ear. Peter closes his eyes at the tone of it. His voice is dulled by almost five months of time, by the amount of times Peter has listened to this voicemail. "When you can..." He says, "You know where we are."

Peter has fingers gouged into his eyes. They're just words through a cell phone but Peter feels them in the meat of his throat every time he hears them.

"I don't want you to feel pressured. I understand that through all of this, your identity has always been your choice. You've always had a backdoor out. I respect that." Steve gets quiet, his voice dropping in a way that Peter had never imagined Captain America's voice to sound. "I know what you've lost is...indescribable." Cap pauses. A while back Peter counted the seconds and got all the way to ten before Steve started again, his voice even lower. "I know."

Peter wishes he could close his eyes tighter, clench his shoulders smaller.

"It's not selfish to choose yourself." Steve says, firm and so, so sure. "Sometimes that's the only thing you can do." Steve sighs. "Please be safe. We're always here for you, if you need us."

And that's it.

Peter turns the phone off and carefully puts it back. He turns the shower on cold, gets in, and rubs his arms pink until he doesn't smell the blood, until he doesn't feel it, until he cannot taste it. He is cold from the outside in.

0 years, 5 months, 3 weeks, 4 days

Uncle Ben shoves his finger into Peter's chest. He opens his mouth, croaks a moan.

The earth trembles beneath their feet. Ben pokes him again, lips forming around the same words again and again, the phrase tattooed in the silent air between them.

Peter feels lead in his biceps, molten iron in his core. Peter has militaries inside is capillaries and fighter jets in his aorta. Drums clash in the pit of his neck. Dangerous, roaring rivers shiver through his biceps, triceps, delts. He is an untapped well of coiled power, his arsenal a fire inside him. Ben pokes his sternum, again and again and again, yelling at him in a silent scream, eyes bulging, face reddening.

Peter pushes Ben backward, who has crystalline mirrors in his eyes. “What do you mean?” Peter asks him, like it's the most important question ever uttered. He slams open palms into his chest, right where Ben had been touching him. “What is *this* ?” He asks, palms spreading wide over his chest. There is thunder in his voice. The small of his back is iced in glacier. His shoulders are made from the cornerstone of Everest, heady and heavy and angry. “Do I have to use *this* responsibly?” Ben is crying, shaking his head, fear bunching his muscles. Peter's voice breaks, “or do I have the responsibility to use it?”

Ben opens his mouth, “Pete,” he manages, voice full of air, and empty of any emotion but desperation, “Pete with great power comes--”

Ben wavers, blanks, and Peter slams into consciousness.

Peter wakes up on the ceiling, trembling, hands and feet sticking effortlessly.

He leans his head against the cool ceiling for a moment and then drops slowly down, landing lightly on his toes.

The clock tells him he got three hours of sleep.

0 years, 5 months, 3 weeks, 5 days

It isn't until he rounds the corner that he realize he's reached the docks on the west side of Brooklyn. He's been at it for hours, feeling his lungs heat up, his calves burn, his shoulders ache. It's three minutes past four in the morning when he acts without thinking coils, springs.

Peter sticks to the side of the building, swings upward. He dangles from the roof by his fingers for a moment and then throws himself upward again and lands on his feet.

To his right, the Lower Bay stretches, glinting brown and orange, waves slopping, pushing, pulling. He knows that the dark mass of land he sees across the bay is New Jersey, but if he could see in a curve, he'd be looking out into the Atlantic Ocean.

Peter's running again before he knows it, his mind mostly empty except for the burn of familiarity. He hits the ledge of the roof hard and rockets himself off it, hits the brick of the next building even harder. His hands sting on impact, but he sticks. He kicks his shoes off to help with the leverage and doesn't stay long enough to see them land.

This roof is multilayered. He hurdles a barrier and finds the ground to not be where he expects it to be. He adjusts last minute, and instead of landing hard on his knees, takes the coming rooftop in a roll. He skids to a stop and rolls easily back onto his feet. Then, Peter dodges left to crawl another

story in a sprint, heaving lungfuls of sea air. A wayward piece of siding comes loose beneath his left hand and Peter stumbles, recovers.

His pace quickens. The next building is taller. He catches it with one hand on its fire escape, flings himself upward, sideways, hits the roof at with an overly dramatic back handspring. He's red-faced now, exhausted, but his hands aren't shaking.

Peter toes the careful line between the roof and the fall for two seconds longer than he should, clammers to the apex of a rooftop water tower and flings himself to the second one, catches it on the way down.

His hands hurt and his left big toe is bleeding.

Peter is wearing a shirt that proclaims, "Entropy: It Just Isn't What it Used to Be", gray sweats, two mismatching socks.

He slides down the water tower to the roof, and his foot catches.

Peter goes pinwheeling over the edge.

His ribcage catches some kind of window box on the three story trip down, but he's too busy impacting with the wide top of a dumpster to really care or notice.

The pain is neither quick nor impermanent. It bruises an immediate line down his spine, his shoulders, his tailbone, and the heels of his feet. It's not sharp, or stinging, but dull, the kind that he feels in every layer of his skin. He feels his heartbeat just beneath his skin everywhere in his body.

He's laughing.

His face is twisted and his lungs are creating this horrible sound, a kind of laughter that cracks up his ribs and pools blood behind his eyes. There's nothing *funny* here, but his suit would have saved him. His suit would have saved *him* but it didn't save her, so he's laughing, he's laughing, rolling off the dumpster, hitting the cement face on, feeling the pain *thump thump thump* with the sound of his heart, laughing laughing laughing.

0 years, 5 months, 3 weeks, 6 days

He comes out of it with three broken ribs, a nasty laceration across the top of his foot, a broken toe, a concussion, and his life.

It takes him almost three hours to hobble home, trembling and bleeding. By the time he collapses in bed, New York promises an impending morning and he's on the edge of passing out because every expansion of his diaphragm jostles his ribs. They need wrapped before they can heal, and he needs to drink some water before his mutated healing factor can set in. It's a long climb to his fourth story apartment. He's got a favor to call in with Deadpool but he doesn't want his help. He doesn't want anyone's help. He doesn't deserve it.

The worst part of this, he thinks, is that he felt almost okay, for a half second. That might have been the worst part in the first place. There was always something glorifying in the night, something soft and unspoken. A promise, perhaps, of a slightly better morning. Spider-Man had

always carried his burdens--people he saved and did not save alike--but for a moment Peter had almost felt the feeling that kept him on patrol. He'd felt adrenaline, he'd felt exhaustion.

He'd felt free.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 0 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds

It's been a half year without her.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 1 hour

After he scales the brick, Peter brushes his fingers against the last rust stain of her blood, doesn't know if this visit is punishment or atonement. He has nothing physical left of her. Even her blood has dried out.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 2 hours

If he makes it to her grave, he'll leave a single red rose like he's done for the past months, but for now he sinks to the ground and looks upward. What was the last thing she saw? Web fluid? The mirrored eyepieces of Spider-Man, calm and unemotional?

Who would she be now, six months later? She is frozen as the person that she was when she died. Peter knows Gwen would hate that. She was always dynamic, fickle. He wonders if she would have grown out of him by now. He wonders if they would have moved in together like they talked about.

Peter is an orphan, an unsteady kid with an anxiety disorder and a life in freefall. But he *wants*. He wants so fiercely and so achingly he is sure he'd trade anything for it. He is sure that this is somehow not real.

He has forgotten the sound of her voice but that *crack* rings in his ears like she died mere hours ago.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 5 hours, 6 minutes

Peter stays for much too long, long enough that the sun starts to rise in the east, long enough for the bell in the clock to ring and ring and ring, long enough to dig something rotten out of the vast hollow of his chest, even after six months of believing he's already given everything he is capable of.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 15 hours, 12 minutes

“Hello Peter. It’s your Aunt. Please call me back. I’m expecting you for dinner tonight.”

“Pete, please. Call me. You’re worrying me.”

“Peter, dear, I just--” A frustrated sigh of breath. Her voice thickens and grows louder, irritated.

“You’re--I’m--” A quiet swear. May hangs up. This is her last message.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 1 day

May stands at his door. It’s nearing too late for her to be out, but her back is straight and her eyes are harsh in the hall light. This is not a social visit.

Peter has answered the door in sweats still gritty with ash. He’s sure the purple bruises beneath his eyes and the dusting of peach fuzz on his jaw complete the picture. He’s sure she sees a disappointment standing in front of her.

May’s face doesn’t soften when she sees him. Aunt May knows that Peter misses Gwen so much that some days he can’t see past it, but today they are both approaching a line.

Even more, Peter is still skittering down that canyon, swinging closer and closer to something he can’t name. He knows as soon as May pushes herself past him and into the room that tonight will not end well.

May sets down a reusable grocery bag on his kitchen table. She takes a carton of eggs out and asks, “Have you eaten?”

He hasn’t.

She busies herself looking for a pan as he watches from the gaping door. She doesn’t say anything else, and Peter shuts the door. He has a cut on his palm that hasn’t healed yet, and he doesn’t remember where he got it. It might have been from the fall he took a few days ago; he’s still got two healing ribs that make every inhale burn, and there’s a black-purple bruise that blotches the majority of his back.

May cracks four eggs and whips them with a fork, preheats the pan. They hit the pan with a crack, sizzling, filling the apartment with the warm smell of food.

When May turns again with his plate in her hand, something has fractured in her expression. She looks every second of her age, wrinkles deep, frown pinched tight over old, sagging skin.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.” May accuses. She holds the plate out.

“M’not hungry.” He says, and winces at how fresh his voice sounds, like he’d just crawled out of bed, though he hadn’t.

“Eat the damn eggs, Peter.” She says. He flinches, feeling panic crawl up from his guts.

He takes the plate and the offered fork. His stomach grumbles, betraying him, and he takes a bite. It’s a good plate of eggs; she’s salted them to his taste. They’re still steaming.

Aunt May watches him take the first four bites with hawk eyes, like she used to when Peter was ten at the barbeques at the park and would rather eat slices and slices of cake than one bite of potato salad.

“I can’t help you.” May decides, still watching him.

Peter is standing barefoot in his own kitchen. He stops eating.

“Peter,” She’s trying to approach it slow like she would a feral animal, but her own impatience, anger, devastation is seeping through. “I cannot help you unless you let me.”

He looks to the side, toward the window. He watches dust motes sharpen the air. Panic reaches his throat in a rock it closes around.

He is a room with the door locked. He does not let people in. He does not let anything out. It’s how people get hurt, after all.

“Pete, do you understand me?” Her voice is rising. Panic? Anger? Peter can’t tell. “I don’t know how to help you anymore. I can’t--” She sighs, long and world-weary. Peter knows where she’s going, though she has only tried to go there once before. “It’s been six months since she died--”

“Since I killed her.” He corrects, whip fast and without thinking. The window wavers wetly in his vision.

This is the first time he’s spoken those words aloud.

“In what *universe* did you get that idea? You didn’t--”

Okay.

Peter is *not* about to be lectured about this. He just isn’t.

He turns back to May, who looks just as stricken as she did before. White hair is wisping away from her bun at the base of her skull. “Like you said, May. You can’t *help me*. ” Vitrol colors his words. He speaks them calmly and without interruption. “I don’t want you to, I don’t want your input.”

Her hand comes down to the counter to brace herself. He doesn’t look at her face, just at the steadying hand at the counter, pocked with age, wrinkled. “You do remember that you lived with me for three months after she died, right? You do remember that I was there for you *every* second when things were at their worst.”

He’s trapped. He’s drowning. He’s a caged animal fast approaching ground.

“I didn’t ask you to.” Peter tells her darkly. “You’re not my mother.”

She jerks like she’s been slapped.

There is a moment of terrible silence.

“How dare you.” May struggles around the emotion (anger, disappointment, insult, sting) in her voice. He has taken it a step too far, he knows. She loves him but even still his pain is no excuse. “How *dare* you.” She chokes. “I have never done anything but love you.”

He doesn’t reply. Just go away, May, please. Don’t let me do this to you.

“I think you should leave.” He says. Peter is suffocating.

“I don’t think I will, thanks.” May cuts.

The fork in his hand is bending he is clutching it so tightly.

Peter *wants*. He wants to tell her. Every detail, from the way Ben’s murderer had felt beneath his fists, to his first time flying through Manhattan, to his mistakes, his errors, to Gwen.

Peter wants, but instead he says, “I think you should leave.”

He finds the courage to meet her eyes and wishes he hadn’t immediately. Her expression sucks the marrow from his bones. “You are not the only one that this is hurting, Peter Parker.” She tells him, scooping up her purse.

She blinks, once, twice, three times, and then turns from him. Her steps do not falter, and the door slams soundly on her way out.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 3 days

“I can’t come in.” Peter says. He’s still in bed. The sheets are sweaty, something smells rancid from the other room, this is pathetic, pathetic, sad. Today he’s decided that he’s going to mourn Spider-Man, too. He killed them both, and no matter how hypocritical or shitty or whatever it might be, he’s going to damn well mourn them both.

He lost a part of himself with Gwen, and maybe this is selfish. Call him an actor, a fake. Accuse of him of lying to everyone he knows and sabotaging the things he loves. Maybe it’s selfish to feel sorry for himself. Maybe it’s disgusting, terrible, sickening. It’s been six months since he stopped saving people, too. It’s been six months exactly since his adult life went up in literal flames. It’s been six months since he gave up something so fundamental that it is *written into his DNA*.

He thinks he is allowed to mourn that.

“You’ve said that about your last three shifts, Parker.” Rahid tells him. “You’re going to get fired this time.”

His face is half buried in the pillows still. “I’m sorry.” He croaks. He’s said those two words a million times now, doesn’t know what else to do.

“Are you okay?”

Peter smothers himself in the pillow. He manages to put his mouth to the receiver and cough, “Getting over a bug.”

“Ah.” Rahid replies, unconvinced.

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 5 days

Peter changes his bedsheets, throws everything out in his fridge, wipes down his counters, opens his windows to get air circulating.

He turns on the shower and strips his shirt off as it warms up. His face in the mirror is a stranger's. This is probably how Aunt May saw him two days ago.

Very distantly, he thinks that the real fissure, the one that's been six months in the making, has yet to hit.

He pulls his shirt back on but does not turn off the shower.

Deadpool finds him curled in the bathroom between the toilet and the shower. It was probably the open windows, though they weren't intended to be an invitation. He should probably be embarrassed, caught in the middle of his terror by an insolent annoyance, but it's moot. Aunt May had seen his writhing raw insides and hadn't known what to do with them. What difference does it make if someone else does, too? Peter is alone in this by choice, he knows.

Peter is dimly aware that Wade stands there for a moment and then turns around and disappears the way he came. Five minutes later, red boots return. They step over Peter's tight form and a moment later the shower turns off. In the silence, Peter hears the whistle of his own lungs. His palms are stinging.

Peter, just beginning to get ahold of himself, stops being able to breathe all together for a second, two, the comfortable familiarity of the noise suddenly gone.

Next, a red glove sets down a very large glass of ice water on top of the tank of the toilet.

Then, on the closed lid, a paper plate stacked with the last of Peter's Eggos stands steaming and covering in butter.

"Pancakes would be better but they weren't quick enough." Wade shrugs. Peter blinks up at him, forces air into his lungs. Wade shrugs, disregarding Peter's gaunt face and red eyes. "Hey, this ain't my first self pity spiral rodeo."

He takes a seat at the edge of the tub. "You better drink that, else I'll give you a swirly and make you drink the toilet water." Harsh and unable to be empathetic, Deadpool nods at Peter and then the glass of water. His tone reminds Peter oddly of Aunt May. Eat the damn eggs, Peter.

He drinks the damn water. His chest hitches and some spills, but he closes his eyes. Coming down sometimes hurts the worst.

"It's super fucked up that the bathroom is where you come to cry." Wade says, and Peter chokes on his water.

"Fuck off." Peter tells him, still coughing.

Wade grins beneath his mask and kicks his foot. Hard. "If I do, is someone going to nag you off the floor?"

He hasn't talked to May in days. "Why do you even care?" Peter manages.

Wade's grin gets impossibly wider. "Spider-Man is my friend." He says. That's not news. Wade is loyal to a fault. Incredibly, irredeemably dangerous, but he loves with his whole heart. "I'm also being paid a pretty penny to monitor him."

The rock resolidifies in his chest. "What?"

"Yeah, sorry dude." Wade says. "SHIELD wanted me to find him, and I found you."

Peter leans his head back, closes his eyes. “They trust you?”

Wade shrugs. “I’m doing my job, aren’t I?”

“You haven’t found Spider-Man yet.” Peter says, turning slightly to look at the other. He wants to know how careful he needs to be, because apparently there are places wherein he can *still* be more vulnerable if he lets himself.

Wade’s grin falters. “Yeah, well.” He pauses. “I found you.” Wade says, like that’s enough. “Speaking of,” Wade continues, kicking Peter’s foot again and standing up. “Call me in a few hours, okay?” For a moment, Peter thinks he hears genuine concern in his voice, but then, “Seriously. We need to talk.”

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 0 days

Peter doesn’t call him.

He also loses his job, but he expected that. Campus is transitioning from Summer semester into Autumn, which starts in two weeks, so he manages to snag an early interview at his old library desk. His manager from last semester had been very understanding of his moody, unhelpful disposition after what happened in early February, but she makes it known to him in not uncertain terms that she’ll tolerate very little of it anymore.

Come on, Parker, it’s been *six months* .

It becomes clear he needs to get his shit together.

Meanwhile, he knows that May has been stewing in her own anger, and it’s become a Thing. He’s finally dug himself deep enough with her that he’s not sure where even to start, so he doesn’t start at all. They’ve never fought like this before. May has always kind of taken Peter’s problems, washed them, wrung them out, and handed it back to him wordlessly. This time Peter is an adult, living on his own. Last time he’d been sixteen years old. His life has been uprooted in much of the same way as it had all those years ago when he discovered he had unnatural powers. He’s probably dealing with his problems now just as well as he had been in the past. But now he’s solidly and self-imposedly on his own.

Also, his sixth month breakdown is a seeping, infected scab in the back of his mind, but he’s stable enough to get his life back into a shape where he pretends to live it. In the week since Deadpool found him, he hasn’t had a patented Breakdown in the Bathroom ever since.

It’s precarious, and he feels it. In the morning his stumbling arrangement bubbles upward to the surface, at night it fights to break through. It occurs to him, haltingly, that he really and truly has *no idea* how to handle this kind of trauma.

And maybe Aunt May is right. Maybe he has to get over himself and let someone in, let something *out* . Maybe he’s just being stubborn and guilty.

But then again, maybe not.

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 4 days, 22 hours

Peter starts his run before the sun goes down one day and all but collides with Mrs. Stacy, who'd moved upstate after the funeral, and made it very clear that she wanted nothing to do with Peter, or anything that reminded her of her loss.

"I--Peter!" She exclaims. Mrs. Stacy looks *just* like Gwen, so much that Peter's heart crawls immediately into his throat, so much that he is frozen in cement shoes. He wants to touch her jaw, her skin. It's irrational, he knows. This is not Gwen.

She's looking at him baffled and a little hurt, a terribly similar expression to Gwen's when Peter told her he was Spider-Man.

He swallows and stutters. "Mrs. uh Stacy, I can't--weren't...your brother? In Ithaca?"

She smiles a thin smile at him. "Can't run forever." She says. She's a widow and a childless mother.

He takes a step back from her. She looks older, her face pinched up. He'd forgotten in the past few months that this is not solely his tragedy.

"Are you--I mean. How are you?" He asks. He hates it when people ask him that.

Mrs. Stacy looks past him to a car honking on the street. She then gives him a piercing look that Gwen had perfected from her. Captain Stacy had been loud and strong and mildly terrifying, but Mrs. Stacy was the kind of iced steel that Aunt May was made out of. The whole damn family was rock and ice, and Peter had *destroyed* them.

Mrs. Stacy, to her credit, gives him a real answer. "I miss her every day." She says. The smile is gone from her voice. They're standing in the street, cars and people streaming all around them. She opens her mouth and closes it again.

Peter feels like he's accidentally fallen through the ice into Lake Superior. His hands are trembling again. "Me too." He croaks.

"I don't suppose it's you that left the rose?"

"Yeah." Peter rubs the back of his neck. "Yeah, I'm there about once a month."

"Good." Mrs. Stacy takes a deep breath. "Listen the things I said to you at the funeral--"

He holds up a hand. "I hardly even remember what they were, to be honest. I think we were all a little wrapped up in ourselves."

Mrs. Stacy nods. "Yeah. That never really gets easier, huh."

She swallows and looks away from him. Not only is this surprisingly painful, it's also hair-splittingly awkward. Peter doesn't know what the hell to say.

"What, uh, brings you back to town?" He asks.

"New York is my home." Mrs. Stacy says. "Like I said, you can't run forever." She gives a bitter, breathless laugh. Someone passing tosses the two of them an odd look. (What a pair they make--the sweaty college kid and the exhausted middle aged woman) "I'm renting a brownstone in Brooklyn, trying to get out of downtown." She continues. "Gwen and George are here." Mrs. Stacy

shrugs. “Ithaca isn’t that fun.” It’s supposed to be a joke, but Peter is noticing now that there’s a half-packed Mercedes with its hazards on in the street, and a cardboard box full of sweaters that look like Gwen’s at Mrs. Stacy’s feet.

He must have accidentally ran all the way from his apartment to the Stacys’.

Mrs. Stacy has asked him a question while he was gaping, and he scrambles to answer it. “I’m still on track to graduate.” He says, and she breathes out, a small, genuine smile on her face. He feels like his whole body is in the stage right before the bruise forms; there’s blood pooling but no physical mark, and everything is tender and hot to the touch.

Peter gives Mrs. Stacy a brittle smile, ready to start running again. “I’ve had a tough summer.”

She places a hand on his forearm. “Peter.” She says, and then steps forward and gives him a hug, the one that Aunt May has been too afraid to give him lest he bite back, the one that no one else would give him. She’s smaller than Gwen, but her arms steal the breath from his lungs.

He’s choking, again.

The hug is brief, and when Mrs. Stacy steps back, she’s wiping her eyes. “We’ll do lunch someday, okay?” She tells him, thumbing an errant tear from the corner of her eye. “I’ll call you when I get settled in.”

It is a clear dismissal. His feet back up. His eyes dart down the sidewalk. “I, uh, yeah.” He says, his voice pinched. He hears the squeeze in it. “That sounds nice. See you later, Mrs. Stacy.”

His feet start up again. His lungs do not.

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 5 days, 4 hours

Peter runs until he can’t think anymore, but even the numbness doesn’t stamp anything down. Instead all he can think about is the fact that Mrs. Stacy is selling the place where Gwen grew up, the fact that Peter singlehandedly took apart a whole family and it took him half a year to look past his own fucking nose and realize it, and the fact that he does, in fact, ruin everything he touches.

And fuck, if this isn’t just the icing on the cake.

Because someone has very obviously broken into his apartment.

Peter should have known that he was toeing the line between insolent and unacceptable, and he should have known that playing this angry-stubborn-holier act is much, *much* easier in the suit, and he should have known that the wary circling was going to end badly.

Peter is smart but he’s not often perceptive, especially about his own behavior.

So when he comes quietly through his apartment door, which is wide open despite the fact that he’d locked it before leaving, and stumbles through it exhausted and drenched in sweat, he stops dead at the dark figure sitting on his couch.

“Hi honey.” Wade says, syrup sweet, saccharine. “I waited up.”

Peter treads lightly. “I hope you know this is crossing a line. Like, every line.” He says, dumping

his keys on the table next to the door and kicking it shut behind him.

“You never called.” Wade replies as if Peter hadn’t said anything.

Wade pauses a moment and stands. In the dark Peter sees the long outline of his shoulders; he’s not wearing the katanas. In fact, as Wade approaches, he notices that his person is lacking of most of his weapons. His holsters stand empty on either side of his hips, whatever it is he keeps buckled around his thighs isn’t even there. For some reason this isn’t comforting.

“Here’s the deal. I have a job to do.”

Peter swallows. “I know.” He says. Wade takes another step toward him. “And I know you weren’t picked for your charming and disarming personality. SHIELD picked you because nobody else would do it. Everyone else knew enough to leave m--Spider-Man alone.”

Wade takes another step.

“SHIELD is kind of a dick, in its entirety. And Spidey is an errant asset.” Peter is not feeling particularly forgiving. “I know how they feel about errant assets.”

To his credit, Wade just shrugs. “Don’t get me wrong, me and Fury aren’t exactly bosom buddies. But.” He takes another step. “A paycheck is a paycheck.”

Wade keeps approaching, enough so that Peter has to take a step back. And another one. And another one.

His back hits the fridge.

Peter’s eyes dart uselessly to the trashcan under the sink that holds the charred remains of his webshooters. He’s faster than Wade, stronger, but he’s got to weigh his options. Too much power and there’s no way his past can stay buried. Not enough and he comes out of this much worse than how he came in.

From the way that Deadpool is looking at him from beneath the mask, he’s not sure it matters.

He is *so* not in the mood for this. In fact, he’s been at a low level panic attack for three hours now, and would much rather tear the skin of his face off than deal with this.

Wade pauses a moment, his boots half an inch away from Peter’s beat-up running shoes, and cocks his head. Wade sighs. “This isn’t really all that funny anymore.”

Peter rolls his eyes despite the pounding in his chest, “I didn’t think it ever was funny. Glad we’re on the same page.” Wade doesn’t say anything. Peter keeps jabbering, “Does this mean you’ll go away?”

Wade smiles, real, genuine. “You’d think New York infrastructure wouldn’t be designed to hold something as big as the elephant in this room.” He says, “But hell, what do I know? Apparently giant portals are a thing that exist now. Next thing you know Rachel and Ross weren’t actually on a break and Paris prefers big bull dogs to yappy chihuahuas.”

This doesn’t make sense. “What?” Peter asks. A third of every conversation he’s ever had with Wade Wilson have been him asking this question.

“It’s like....in those Harry Plopper books with the magic. Harry thinks the stag was cast by his dad, but in the end it was him that saved him from himself.” Deadpool takes another step closer.

Peter takes a ragged breath. “You’re mixing references.” Wade is close enough that Peter can feel the heat from his body, can hear him breathe. He can’t back up anymore. His feet are beginning to ache.

What ? “What?” Peter asks again, “What the hell?” He spits, “That’s not fair.”

Peter, inexplicably, gags a little, blood rushing out of his face, feeling woozy and cold all of the sudden.

The bite didn't give him the simple, predatory instincts that actual spiders have, but the bite combined with four years of vigilantism have led him to always come out fighting when cornered.

Something cracks underneath Peter's fingers.

Oh.

“Holy shit that was awesome.” Deadpool is saying from his own position sprawled on the floor two feet away. His hand is at an unnatural angle to his body. In fact, so is the entirety of his right arm. Peter must have wrenched it from the socket in breaking his wrist.

There are hot, wet sparks gathering at the corner of Peter's eyes. He breathes in dust motes from his shitty apartment's shitty carpeting.

Wade groans, shifts, “Tenured assassin.” He brags, though Peter hadn’t asked, doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t care, doesn’t

White spots flash beneath his eyelids. His lungs deflate deflate deflate but cannot expand.

Deadpool gets up. There's a squishy noise, an outpouring of breath, a crack. "Fuuuck," Wade moans. He's so pushy and annoying and insincere and immature. Peter hates him. Peter hates him with everything he has. Peter hates him so much that his insides catch fire, so much that he wants to bleed the flames from every pore.

Deadpool takes a step, another step, over where Peter hasn't moved or breathed.

He's sprawled out, open, vulnerable, exposed. His stomach is arched from the floor, fingers clenched, eyes shut tight. He can't even *breathe*.

"Here's the deal" Wade says, flippant and utterly lacking of anger or humor or tone, "Whatever the fuck your problem is." He says, stepping over Peter. "Take care of it. Get a manicure. Brush your webshooters, whatever." Deadpool crouches down to whisper in his ear. "Take fucking care of yourself, because I don't want another paycheck from SHIELD, and I *hate* the way Barton patrols." Wade stands. "Your city needs you, Spidey." He says.

Something hot and red tears across Peter's vision, and he thinks: *here is is. The fission.*

The door slams.

Peter gives him one, two, three seconds before he jerks upward, tosses the side table out of his way, stumbles into the bedroom.

He tears three drawers from his wardrobe, flings the ones he doesn't need at the wall, digs through the one he needs until he finds what he wants.

He tugs a black hoodie over his head. He tightens his laces. He locates his wrestling mask.

Peter gives Deadpool another one, two, three seconds before he's out the window, climbing up the fire escape, agony and anger hardening his muscles.

Here it is, he thinks, *the fission.*

Anger clears his vision.

Chapter End Notes

1. I apologize for the "getting over a bug" pun. It was not intended, and I only discovered it when I was editing.

2. I find that comparing idea of comforting someone in such a mental state to being upfront, honest, and cuttngly blunt to be a very interesting comparison. If you notice, Aunt May coddles Peter, a result of her own loss and the fact that she's in much, much over her head. Wade doesn't. Wade gives Peter shit because that's who he is, that's the nature of their relationship, and sometimes it's not niceties that you need. Aunt May can't seem to understand that because she herself doesn't have a great enough grasp of what is the problem (because, well, Spider-Man) but Wade...might. So if you want a hint for the next chapter, there it was.

3. I'm fairly certain that in TASM 2 6 months was the timeline it took for SM to make

an appearance. I suppose you could call what he does in this chapter an “appearance,” but....yeah haha about that....

Up next: Wade finally gets some characterization! A backstory! His own emotional complexities!

break

Chapter Summary

It's brutally gratifying to watch Wade reel back, grunting in pain. The punch is so powerful that as pain zings up through Peter's wrist and forearm, Wade comes down hard on his left knee, one hand cradling his jaw.

There's half a second of startled silence, and then Deadpool looks back at him, his mask blank and black and Peter feels the fire in his veins heat up. Game on, motherfucker.

Chapter Notes

If you want further proof of how this fic owns my heart and soul, picture this: me, listening to the playlist i created for this fic, scrolling through comments on the youtube video of gwen's death in TASM2. Someone has commented "Glenn Stacy haha" It makes me laugh, like psycho laugh, like I'm crying laughing at something that isn't funny. Five minutes later I am just crying. Someone else has commented "Thanks Obama." It's 3 AM.

Warnings are at the bottom for this one, as one of them is relevant to the plot. I've also added relevant tags.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 4 days, 22 hours

Spider-Man is out of practice, but physically his stamina is fine; all those nights spent running himself into exhaustion have kept him in shape. He also doesn't have webs, but the buildings are never more than a jump apart. Besides, Wade doesn't have that much of a head start on him.

It takes him a while to hone down and find Deadpool, but not enough time passes for rationality to filter in and win against his other competing terrors.

He finally gets him near the bridge where traffic is denser and there's more foot traffic from the subway station. It's late evening. The sun set about an hour ago, but the western sky still bleeds gray light over the city. Weekday traffic is not light, and it's not late enough for the streets to be empty.

Sick excitement pushes blood through his chest.

Peter skids to a stop six stories above where Deadpool is in the street, walking with his head down. There isn't quite a *crowd* of people, but the stream of people flooding upward from the subway parts around him in a wide berth. It's an easy spot, one that makes the sick taste in Peter's mouth

recede, if only slightly.

Peter watches him for a second or so, a pause that is just enough for the truth of the circumstance hit him again. Deadpool *knows*. It's enough to refuel the angry mass that sits inside him.

He bends and finds a solid rock, weighs in his bare palm for a moment, and then climbs down to a third floor window planter, where he perches, pauses, and then lobs it.

"Hey jackass!" Peter shouts, feeling like his chest is pushing the words out of him. He realizes that he can't see all that well, whether it be the mask or the way that he's woozy with emotional exhaustion.

The rock impacts dully on the side of Wade's head and sends him reeling. Peter knows it's habit and paranoia that has him recovering with a .22, drawn from God knows where. The man is a killer

There's shout from the sidewalk at the sight of the piece, another shout, and people begin to scramble away. Wade doesn't lower the gun, but Peter watches realization loosen his shoulders. Deadpool, in a flick of imperceptible motion, thumbs the safety on but keeps the gun raised.

Peter smirks beneath the mask, something manipulative and rotten pulling at his face.

He slinks to ground level, snake-like. He's shedding a skin

Deadpool looks slightly amused beneath his preternaturally expressive mask, but Peter gets the sense that there's more emotion beneath his steady trigger finger and the clench of his other fist. Peter thinks it might be concern, which is cute, but not necessary. Maybe it's vindication, hatred, *whatever*. Peter doesn't care. There's nothing left inside him to bring to the surface other than his broiling blood, his curdled bone marrow, the sickness at the base of his brain stem.

"What are you--" Deadpool starts.

"Stay away from my aunt." Peter snarls, which, woah, was not what he meant to say at all. He's not really in control of himself at the moment. Leave a message after the beep.

Wade lowers the gun and puts it back in his hip holster, the one that was empty when he left Peter's apartment.

He lifts one shoulder. "Why should I?" He challenges, and Peter is on him in a moment with two flat palms into his chest.

He's forgotten how strong he is. The last villain he'd had his hands on was Green Goblin, who was expecting it.

Peter feels sixteen again. Indescribably angry. A fundamental lack of knowledge on how to control it.

Wade goes flying backward into traffic, where a solid black Buick swerves to a stop just in time for Deadpool to crack against the passenger side door. Peter follows him into the street, but stops when he sees Wade roll his shoulders, cough wetly, and stand up.

The driver of the Buick has an expression of hesitant, ugly confusion on his face. "C'mon Spidey." Wade throws out his arms, standing in the middle of the street, half-leaning against the car. There's a murmur from the crowd. Peter feels eyes on him, on his mask, on his clenched hands and straight spine. "You wanna dance?" Deadpool's hands come up in front of him now, placating. Someone from the audience snaps a picture. "Because, honestly, I don't. My box-step is trash and just 'cause

I know Spanish don't mean I know the salsa." He tosses his head toward the crowd, which has grown instead of dispersed in terror. "I'd prefer to, y'know, be taught in *private* ." The hint isn't subtle.

Peter takes a few steps forward anyway.

His fists clench painfully at his side. Wade sighs and trades a conspiratorial look with the Buick driver, who looks more green and terrified than anything else. "Have it your way, Webhead."

Wade cracks his heel into the thick silver rims of the car hard enough to pop the cap loose from the tire, scoops it up, and frisbees it right into Peter's gut.

The pain is a shock that knocks all the power from Peter's lungs. He's sure that the sharp side probably pierced skin. In the next second, Deadpool is there again, hooking an ankle underneath Peter's and slamming his skull to the ground. Peter lashes out to sweep Deadpool off his feet too. But Deadpool is well-practiced and was better than Peter at abject hand-to-hand even at his peak; he manipulates himself so his elbow jams underneath Peter's ribs with the momentum of his entire body.

Peter jackknifes and catches Wade across the chin but the angle is wrong, so the impact isn't maximized. Instead, Wade rolls and catches Peter by the front of his sweatshirt and hauls him to his feet. "What are you *doing* ?" Deadpool hisses, rattling him, but Peter's knee comes up between Wade's legs. He wears a cup, but it startles him out of the death grip on Spider-Man's sweatshirt.

It's enough for Peter to get in a swift and ruthless sucker punch that cracks one of his fingers.

It's brutally gratifying to watch Wade reel back, grunting in pain. The punch is so powerful that as pain zings up through Peter's wrist and forearm, Wade comes down *hard* on his left knee, one hand cradling his jaw.

There's half a second of startled silence, and then Deadpool looks back at him, his mask blank and black and Peter feels the fire in his veins heat up. Game on, motherfucker.

He crosses to the middle of the street and gets the sole of his right shoe into Deadpool's chest, but he miscalculates his own mass and plants himself into the asphalt. He lands at the white-sneakered feet of an elderly lady, his chin biting heavily into the grit of the road, his nose colliding fast and hard with the the curb.

Peter picks up his head to peer up at her; she's slight, hispanic, and very alarmed. "*Dios*," She utters, "Are you--"

"Scuze us," Deadpool interrupts, twisting the hood of Peter's sweatshirt until it cuts off his air. He peels Peter off the pavement, and lobs him again. This time his back crashes into the brick of a building. His funny bone crushes against the cement when he lands on the ground. It's enough to prick tears in his eyes, and then his lungs are in his throat and his brain is pounding, pounding, and he watches through bleary eyes as Deadpool approaches again.

Someone has called the police because there are sirens, the squeal of tires. People shouting.

Peter scrambles upward, but only gets himself in a sitting position before Wade is upon him. He sticks to the wall, though, and keeps scrambling backward, until he's crouched on the wall at the same height as he would be standing.

Deadpool, to his credit, spares a glances backward, where police are scrambling out of their cars, standard guns raised, yelling, *stand down, come down, get on the ground* .

He moves to hold his hands up, like he's fine with getting arrested, but in a flash an elbow is coming straight into Peter's sternum and a fist at the lower ridge of his jaw, and then Deadpool splits, barreling into the ground and right through the police line.

While they're distracted, Peter swallows the blood and hatred and jumps up the wall, onto the roof, and pursues.

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 4 days, 23 hours

Wade loses the police in ten minutes of running in circles, but Peter is at least half a shred smarter than the police.

Wade is quick and smart when he wants to, so Peter doesn't catch up to him until he's ten and a half blocks west and well into Williamsburg. And it's less "catching up" to him than it is Wade materializing out of a hiding place in the shadows on top of a heating unit on an apartment roof.

Deadpool kicks him across the face.

Peter can't help himself--he cries out, surprised and angry and in pain. He reels backward and lands on his ass. Wade skids after him and catches him by the forearms before anything else can happen.

Peter's nose is sluggishly bleeding, his hands throb, and his heart roars in his chest.

"Spidey," Wade says, voice tight. "*Shit*, Spidey."

Peter struggles out of Wade's hold, already feeling bruises purpling his skin in the shape of fingers, but Wade resists, and suddenly all Peter can taste is blood, from his nose, from his lips, and all he can feel is physical, throbbing pain. And then he's trying to force his hands up toward his mask, opening his mouth to tell Wade off, but being horrified when he finds all that comes out is a half-sob.

"Spidey, hey, come on" Wade is saying.

The fight has drained out of Peter as quickly as it came, and with it his spine sinks, until the only thing holding him up is Wade by his forearms. Peter manages to catch Deadpool in the cheek, which gives sickeningly. It's enough to both tell Peter that he'd fractured Wade's cheekbone in that punch earlier and to get Wade to relent and release Peter with a short, wet gasp of pain.

Peter goes straight for his mask.

"Oh God," He says with a spray of blood. His split lip catches on fabric, and then the mask is gone, he doesn't know where it went "Wade, please, just stay the hell away from my aunt, don't--"

"Spidey." Wade warns at the crown of Peter's head, at his exposed, ragged hair and sloping neck, at the curved profile of his caved cheeks and tender forehead.

"I can't lose anything else, I can't--"

Wade puts a hand at the back of his neck. "Peter, I--"

Peter lurches away from the touch and all its unfamiliarity, crunching Wade's wrist in his grip.

Wade immediately recoils, “Fuck, really? Twice in one night?” He grunts shortly. His mouth is slurring, slightly, further confirming the fractured cheekbone theory.

Peter’s fingers bite deeper into the injured wrist, out of spite, maybe, or maybe because he needs something to cling to. Wade doesn’t see it that way, and hits him in the arm with the side of his other palm. Peter reacts without thinking, determination dissolving in his chest.

He was a force, once. He used to be able to get what he wanted and defend what he needed.

Wade is sitting next to him on the dirty slope of the roof, so Peter gets a knee under himself and swings his hips and shoulders around to pin him, one hand tightening on Wade’s swollen, healing wrist, the other hand securing Wade’s other arm.

“What do you know.” It’s a command, not a question. Peter had meant to be getting this information from the start. “What does SHIELD know.”

“This is...” Wade slurs, something rough and heavy in his throat. It’s probably blood. “This is...doing it for me?” He grins. Winks.

Peter slaps him across the face, backhanded. “Fuck you.”

Wade chuckles, “You are so fucking naive.” He says, newly free hand settling at the base of his throat and slightly tightening. It’s enough to distract Peter from the way he hasn’t quite pinned Wade’s legs. One knee comes up hard and then it’s Peter who is pinned, one hot tear escaping as the worst pain of the night heats his pelvis. He chokes with it, trembling ragged breaths coming unevenly.

Something gurgles in his throat.

“The hell is your problem?” Wade is demanding. If Peter could...if he could just...overcome the emotion in his chest, just push upward, find it in himself to wriggle beneath Wade and get an elbow or a knee or even his fucking forehead into flesh, he could be free, he could--

A tear finds its way down his face.

“You *know*.” Peter is scrambling for some sense of control for the first time tonight, but he can’t find it. His head is full and brimming and his biceps and quads and calves bear the brunt of the weight. “You can’t know, you can’t, okay? Nobody can. Only...” He whispers. “Only Gwen knew.”

Which was not what he meant to say at all.

“Look, I told you we needed to talk, and you never called.” Wade’s grip tightens on Peter’s wrists. “So, for right now, can you calm down enough to have a rational conversation with me?” Wade asks, which is, like, super fucking ironic, because Deadpool is often considered the unhinged one when it comes to Team Red....and the superhero world in general.

Peter scrambles. “Get *off* me.” He snaps, clipped and void of breath. He wriggles one hand free and pushes weakly at Wade’s chest, feels his pectorals beneath his hand. Wade, with all his muscle and weight, is unforgiving.

Peter’s hand moves and digs into the shoulder he’d dislocated under an hour ago. His fingers give into the swell of tendons and irritated muscles beneath Wade’s suit. The reaction is immediate, there’s a surprised and pleasantly pained gasp of breath and then his arm gives out, sending Wade’s masked face straight into the rooftop between Peter’s chin and his shoulder. It gives Peter

enough of his own strength back to haul over Deadpool and then they're scrambling against each other on the rooftop for the upper hand, landing pathetic attempts at punches, encouraging more bruises to sprout.

Peter is losing it.

His limbs feel floppy, as if he can't control them, and inside his heart is still burning, but the feeling is turning inward. Peter can never escape the feeling that he is not enough. Every choice and every action alienates the people he cares about while simultaneously putting those same people in danger.

Peter had thought that his whole world had dissolved when Gwen died, but this kind of information, the bombshell that Wade holds in his back pocket, could actually end his world, rather than merely irrevocably changing it.

He tries for another punch, but he's sure that it hurts his cracked ring finger more than it hurts Wade, who still has the mental capacity to give pretty solid hits that Peter feels to his core.

"Stop." Deadpool says, finally, breathing heavily and sitting on Peter's chest, which is a wet cave of terror, of sadness, of disappointment.

From the way it throbs, Peter knows his face is a study in purples and reds.

He realizes, in the stuttered second between one breath in the next, that the balance he'd been unable to understand in the last six months was only easy because of Gwen. She loved both parts of him. Disregarding the (huge and horrible and most important aspect of it all) fact that Peter *had killed her*, it had been *easy* to be himself, wholly, with her. And he thinks he might blame her, just a little, for loving him. For accepting him. He blames her for giving him two years of alternative reality. He blames her for the silk-screen shades of happiness, because they hadn't been real, right? They'd both fooled themselves into the faux calmness of *easy*.

And now he has a compromised identity and her ghost, and it isn't easy, and he isn't happy, and the life he led before (two beautiful years, where he'd entertained the hope of a future) are all just hypnotic memories, shades of a reality that never existed in the first place.

"Peter, stop it." Wade commands, trying to fend off Peter's flailing arms, which at this point are just trying to get away from the crushing weight on his chest.

"Get off me," He repeats, his voice significantly crunchier than it was the last time he said it. "I'll--" He coughs. Closes his eyes. Another tear escapes. "I'll do whatever you want." He says. "Whatever SHIELD wants. Just--Just get *off*."

Deadpool asks, "Are you done punching me?"

Peter doesn't open his eyes, nor does he respond.

And then the weight is gone, the warmth of Deadpool's body replaced by the breeze of a waning summer. Peter's hands find his face to cover it, fingers sliding through the blood from his various injuries.

It's not coming back, he knows. Whatever beauty he'd found between her fingertips, whatever contentment he'd found on cold winter mornings between tangled legs and morning breath, whatever easiness he'd found with a woman who'd proofread lab reports just as soon as she'd disinfect wounds...it's gone indefinitely. Forever.

And that is maybe what scares him the most. That is maybe what he's been fighting all along. Because the memories locked inside him are all that he has left of her. Gwen Stacy the way that Peter Parker saw her. Peter Parker the way Gwen Stacy saw him. Giving that up means both accepting his wrongs as Spider-Man and Peter Parker and accepting his unhealthy methods of ascertaining happiness.

And that, as it always has been, is his fundamental problem. What gets him out of bed in the morning? It used to be his nagging Aunt and Uncle, and then it was just his Aunt, and then it was Spider-Man, and now it's nothing.

"Who knew such a nerdy ass kid could pack such a fucking punch." Wade jokes, probably because the silence grows stagnant and Peter hasn't removed his hand from his face. He's a little busy rounding out this little breakdown, so.

"Whatever you're planning," Peter starts. "Whatever SHIELD wants, I think I've made it clear that I'm not interested." His throat his closing hotly, and, yeah, there's another tear.

Wade snorts. "Duh. I have eyes, Peter. And ears and a nose and stuff. Still human, under here. Well, mostly. But, like, SHIELD hired me to monitor you, nothing more." Wade adds, which surprises Peter. "At least *one* of us has to have straightforward motivations, and it ain't you. Anyway, I'm not disagreeing with you. Considering the meltdown you just had maybe s'a good thing you put Spidey away."

Peter...hadn't really thought about it that way. All this time he thought he was putting his alter ego down like a biting dog, but maybe Wade has a point. Not being Spidey was beneficial to the world in more ways than one. Maybe even beneficial to himself.

"Uh." Wade says again, when Peter doesn't reply. "So, do you want a beer or something? I've got a safe house here in Williamsburg, y'know me, Hipsterpool, wearing the big red suit before the jolly fat man made it cool and all. Also, you look like you could use a beer--I mean, all underage undergrads do, but...I'd offer you a coffee, but a stimulant is probably not what you need? Shit, y'know I'm realizing that I might have gone about this wrong in the first place. I get why Hill keeps telling me I have zero tact, s'like tapping at the walls in the aquarium just to get the puffer fish to freak out and blow up."

Peter listens to Wade's feet scrape against the gravel for a moment, and then, "C'mon, man, don't leave me hanging."

Peter tentatively peers out between the space between his fingers and sees an extended hand.

A maskless Wade Wilson's extended hand.

Wade gestures at himself self-consciously. "It's our gig, y'know? Witty banter, Marvel's mouthiest, but we're not...friends? We don't trust each other." He exhales, wipes a hand over his pock-marked, bald head to the back of his neck. He isn't smiling. "You show me yours and I show you mine? I guess?" He waggles his fingers a bit, back stiffening. "Hi, I'm Wade Wilson, you've known that I'm Deadpool for three years." He gives him a tentative smile, and then, "You're Peter Parker and I've known you were Spider-Man for five months."

Wade sets a chilled beer on the coffee table in front of Peter, who sits on the couch with his elbows dug into his knees and his hands dug into his hair, watching idly as blood drips from the swell of his upper lip onto the excess fabric of his oversized sweatshirt.

A dull hurt is blossoming in his chest, regret fresh and heavy following after. What was he thinking? He doesn't feel any better. He almost feels worse; happiness is fading behind him like landscape out a car window.

He's standing at the bottom, crevices of pointed rocks blocking the sun, and hope is dying inside him.

He's been asking himself (and asking and asking and asking) *what do I do now* for six months and he still doesn't know.

Peter is tired.

He's tired and his body is a livewire and he wants to give up.

"I recall you being somewhat more chatty when we used to team up." Deadpool slurs from somewhere behind Peter, where he's been standing in a rather transparent attempt for Peter not to see his face. Maybe he's back there because of the cheekbone fracture, but it's probably because of the scars.

"Yeah." Peter can't think of a single witticism to quip back. It's sunk bone deep, this grief. People tell him that he would never really get over Gwen, just learn to live with her memory, but she's like spikes in his bones, and he can't imagine a time when this pain won't be fresh. "I should go."

"Probably." Wade agrees. "But why come all this way and still--"

"I really should just go." Peter replies tonelessly, though he does not make any move to stand up.

"Okay, sure." Wade says in a way that Peter can hear him rolling his eyes. "I get that you don't like to feel trapped, but kid, I've been where you've been and I usually end the night with a slice of bullet pie, and you probably wouldn't bode as well as I would. Death and I used to fuck, y'know."

Peter glances up and at Wade sharply, who takes a step back at the eye contact like it's a threat. Here Deadpool is, clearly vulnerable and uncomfortable, and it's all for Peter, for Spider-Man.

"I wouldn't--" Peter clips himself off because--

Wade's expression doesn't change but he holds eye contact.

Once when Peter was a teenager, Ben's death still fresh, the bite still new, he'd webbed a jumper on the Brooklyn bridge. Naive, he'd expected thanks, but as he waited for emergency services, the man just sobbed and asked, over and over, *why didn't you let me die, please, why did you stop me*. Peter had not understood the terrible darkness that plagued him. He'd been young enough to deal only in black and white--saving someone meant saving someone. Period. At sixteen and reeling from the loss of his parents and his uncle and his childhood, he'd wondered what kind of hopelessness painted the sunrise in grays or how backed into a corner or alone someone would have to feel in order to not be able to see any future happiness.

Why didn't you let me die.

Peter feels tears heat the corners of his eyes again.

“Right.” Wade begins slowly. He looks away, a courtesy that Peter doesn’t ask for. “You wouldn’t.” He agrees, taking a long pull from his Bud Light. When he pulls off, he wipes a gloved hand over his head, and Peter pegs it as a nervous habit.

Wade works his jaw when it becomes clear that Peter isn’t going to look away. In the vulnerable light of his Williamsburg kitchen, despite the cutting shadows of the scars that some have called him a monster for, Wade looks more human than he ever has.

The thought makes Peter’s sternum feel like someone has squeezed an orange all over it, so he turns and asks his sweating bottle, “What does SHIELD know?”

Behind him, there’s a clinking sound as Wade takes off his katana straps. His boots shuffle on linoleum. Peter twists around again and watches him open a drawer and remove a thin manila folder, which he hands to Peter.

Inside are SHIELD watermarked incident reports; one for the mugging in the alley, one for the coffee shop meet up, for the brief rooftop encounter, and a forth for a discovery log of a stash of Peter’s clothes that Deadpool had apparently found. Each report details what happened in Wade’s unfamiliar chicken scratch.

He pulls the coffee shop one close and catches the line *Parker may be protecting SM, but is not willing to budge on giving him up. Read: SM is alive but living under his original identity. SHIELD status: non malignant, passive. Threat level: minor.*

Which...doesn’t make sense. It’s dated three months ago, which is two months after Wade had found out Peter’s identity. “What?” He asks.

Wade, who is now sitting on top of the back of the couch, sighs, “I’ve told you this 1.2 zillion times. The money is for monitoring. I don’t owe SHIELD anything else.”

“So you didn’t tell them? They don’t know?”

Wade laughs quietly. “Naive.” He declares. “It’s naive to think that. This is a multi-million dollar intelligence operative that you’ve worked closely with. If they’re trying to watch you when you’re not Spider-Man because they think you’re a threat, then they watched you when you were Spidey. Hell, they knew who I was after my *second* hit. Now they probably know every single specific torture that they--” He cuts off, hand at the back of his head, “Look, Peter, if you know where to look, it’s not a hard connection. You’re a lanky nerdy angry dude that takes pictures of the *masked* lanky nerdy angry dude.”

Peter sits on that for a moment, watching Wade toe absently at a dissected glock on the coffee table next to Peter’s beer. It’s the only thing out of place in the otherwise pristine apartment. The building still smells like fresh paint, and it’s obvious it’s not an apartment that’s ever really been lived in, apart from the beer in the fridge.

“So you..think the identity thing is just to make myself feel better?” Peter asks finally.

“I dunno. Depends on whether you consider SHIELD the good guys or the bad guys.”

It’s a sickening thought.

“So what are you going to do with it?” Peter asks quietly. He thinks of Green Goblin curling claws over Gwen and letting her fall. He’s sure that Deadpool wouldn’t do that to Aunt May without

reason, but he's been wrong before.

"Do with what?"

"What you know."

Wade is silent for a long and weighty moment. When Peter turns toward him Wade is looking away. It sends another spike of hurt through his chest, because Deadpool looks almost...unhappy. Perhaps his mask is so expressive because Wade himself emotes everything; in a way, the fabric becomes another way to cover it up, protect himself.

Now, scars stretched tight over his pale face, Wade shakes his head and takes another pull of his drink. "I've been a killer since I was ten years old, Parker." He says quietly, something raw in his voice that Peter has never heard from him before. "Shot my dad between the eyes. He beat my mother to death soon after I was born, and tried to get me to follow for the next nine years. Joined Special Ops at seventeen. Got kicked out by twenty. Started taking hits until I got cancer, and then, wham, here I am years later and if I *wanted*," Wade says, voice growing harder, "a sad piece of shit like you dead I would just do it my goddamned self."

Wade gets up and Peter bites his split lip, feeling the zing of blood over his teeth, wondering what he'd said wrong.

"I'm--"

"Stop." Wade says, yanking open the fridge for another beer. "I get it." The unnamed emotion in his voice snorts out into self-deprecation. Peter watches Wade thumb a long scar that sits on the back of his neck and juts straight to the base of his skull. It's a few millimeters deep and the skin around it is a pale that bleeds to pink to a darker red, like an incision on a cadaver.

The scar looks like it hurts.

It registers, somewhat belatedly, what this looks like. Spider-Man hadn't exactly been subtle about disapproving Wade's less-than-moral past, and had expressly *never* trusted him. And now Wade is handling Peter's broken shell, looking at him without the hindrance of mask on either side, and Peter had, once again, disregarded Wade's loyalty because of an idea of who he was as a person.

It's a familiar hubris that had built with every action he took as Spider-Man. Stop a rape, stop a mugging, stop a bus from flipping on its side, and he's better. He's *good*. He's saving another Peter Parker somewhere from losing an Uncle Ben. Now, that morality has turned on its head. A million good deeds do not erase a single bad one, and someone who has done a million good deeds is no more inherently moral than someone who has only done one.

Chaotic Neutral Wade Wilson really has only ever killed bad people who do bad things, and the line between right and wrong in those kind of circumstances get fuzzier and fuzzier as you approach it.

To be fair, Peter is enough of a cynical bastard that he'd ask anybody with his identity the same question with the same amount of doubt to their character, but

"I'm not in any position to trust anyone right now." He admits, and even that felt like he was moving a massive boulder just to shell out. He mutters. "Can't even trust myself."

Wade lets out a quiet huff. "I'll drink to that."

Peter raises his bottle at him and follows.

"I suppose cornering you in your apartment was my bad, then." Deadpool says.

Peter rolls his eyes.

"So why'd you quit?," Wade asks, the flippancy back in his voice. He moves to stand in front of the window and command Peter's attention.

"Didn't your research give you an answer to that, tenured assassin?" Peter asks dully, taking a sip of his warming beer. He doesn't like the way alcohol blurs him, but he needs something to dull the thunder of realization inside him.

"I mostly stumbled onto your identity. Superhero bro code, dude. I didn't look any further.." Wade says shortly. He smiles, lips cracking. "Vacation? Trying out a new thing, new costume, some sort of millennial staple--Kale Boy? It's not you it's me, I wanna focus on my studies--"

"I don't really--"

"--somebody die?"

"--want to talk about it." Peter replies on a gust of long breath.

There's a pause.

"Who is Gwen?" Deadpool asks, like some kind of curious fucking toddler. "You said her name on the roof."

"Nobody." Peter snaps. "Can you give it a rest?"

"Again, have you met me? I annoy information out of people. It's how I got so rich."

"It's also why I broke your cheekbone." Peter replies, whip fast. Deadpool absently rubs at his cheek, which underneath the light of the apartment, is colored an orange-pink and cut through with scars that look seconds away from seeping.

"True. But can I just--"

"No."

"Won't you just--"

"No."

"How 'bout if I--"

"Christ, Wade, she was my girlfriend, okay?" Peter cuts in, irritated again, buzzing, feeling sick. His face hurts, and when he talks he pulls at his split lip.

There's another beat of silence.

"Was" Deadpool quotes.

Fuck . "You're a lot smarter than people give you credit for." Peter says, closing his eyes.

"S'my job," Wade barrels on, "So? Overdose? Drunk driver? Killed by her own clones?" Peter's senses are starting to buzz. "Fall off a bridge? Bird Flu? Supervillan?" Peter flinches. Wade stops. "*Fuck*, which one? I'm going to keep guessing."

“It was me.” Peter responds, small, with his head ducked. It tastes awful in his mouth and he wants to bring it back in, stop the words from dispersing through the air. He’s not sure why he said it. Standing across the room is a man who patently Does Not Care, who does not need to know, who has no stake and no preference in the matter, and no real relevance in Peter’s life, other than the fact that he can’t seem to get the memo and get the hell out of it. His own demons left their mark as permanent disfigurements, so what the hell does Deadpool care about Peter’s?

“It was...what what who when *who* ? You?”

“I don’t want to talk about her.” He says, and it’s not a lie. This is the most he’d said about her in weeks, other than to fight with Aunt May. “I’m just...I need to go.” Peter stands, fights the head rush he gets from doing so too quickly with several head injuries.

“Woah, woah, *you* don’t kill people!” Deadpool holds up his hands. “I know that because you lecture me about it, like, all the time.” He sounds almost proud about that. “Are we in some sort of alternate universe, because--”

“Green Goblin was Harry Osborn.” He snaps. “Harry Osborn knew me and Gwen.” He sucks air through his teeth, heart thundering against his ribcage. The scene is there in technicolor, rolling and pushing behind his eyes. It’s why he doesn’t close them at night. He doesn’t want to see it again. “She was there, that night. I told her, *fuck* , I told her to not get involved to stay away.” He tosses a half wild look toward Deadpool, who is frozen in the center of the room.

The words come.

Just as before, they force themselves out of his chest and he can’t stop them, doesn’t know how.

“I’d promised her dad that I’d keep her safe. I’d promised him on his last dying breath, but I loved her too much to let her go. I was...am...selfish.” He rockets into a pace and turns from Wade’s listening blue eyes. “But she was there. She was there anyway because she was so goddamned stubborn and she loved me back. And Harry was out of his mind, but he still knew it.

“He had me by the throat, and I couldn’t stop her when she slipped.” He coughs to dislodge the tightness. “The drop must have only been a few seconds, but...she closed her eyes halfway through. She must have known. She must have been *terrified* . There were tears in her eyes when she closed them, and I remember thinking *just get to her, just get a web, just get to her* . And it was too slow and too low, the web. Too much tension. I got her right *here* .” He jabs his thumb into the skin right above his navel. The skin smarts beneath the pressure. “I’ve thought about it, and if I’d used both shooters? If I had caught her higher? The shoulder or chest or something? She’d probably not even be walking yet but she’d still be--

“But I got her here.” He presses his thumb into his belly harder. “The web tension jerked her spine and her head hit the ground.” Peter closes his eyes. “At first there was a low level panic, but *relief* , because I’d caught her. I’d saved her, because that’s what I do, as Spider-Man. That’s what I do as Peter Parker. Protect the things I care about. She was dead, of course, from the moment my web touched her.

“So I tied off the web and she just--” her body had bent unnaturally backward, held in place by his own webbing, his own hope. “*Hung there* .”

“Peter--” Wade says, trying to interrupt, but Peter has to say it, can’t stop now.

“I was calling her name and touching her face, and my...my arm came up to cup her head and the--” he feels bile build at the back of his throat. “The bones of her shoulders, her neck, didn’t fit

anymore. I could feel them against my arm. I learned later that it was the spinal torsion that jerked them out of alignment, and then they'd--they'd shattered when she'd hit the ground.

"It's quick, you know. She would have felt more pain on impact, but she was dead before then. The fall--the way she landed--shattered almost every bone in her body, or at least everything from her shoulders and up and her ankles and down. Her torso didn't even hit the ground.

"I cut her down and couldn't even--I didn't even have the strength to stand and hold her." His hands are human and covered in skin when he looks down at them. "I don't remember when I realized when she was dead."

He is indescribably small in the frigid, impersonal apartment. These few moments of time that he's been carrying so safely inside him have created a tundra around him.

He can stop talking, now. He's been silent for long enough. Peter opens his mouth to form an excuse, to find a way to get out, retreat, hide, crawl back into the shell he'd cracked out of.

"I--" He starts, and continues with, "still don't, I dunno, believe it. Not all the way. I miss her in such a strange way that it still feels like she'll come back." He spares a glance over at Wade, who's face is scrunched in a way that's foreign to Peter's interpretation. His brows are drawn and his eyes are distant.

Peter feels compelled to add, "I didn't mean to--" but it surprises the hell out of him when his throat closes around the rest of the sentiment.

Peter hadn't realized *he'd* killed her until much later, at the funeral. Aunt May had wrapped him into a hug, a *real* hug, with claw tight hands, her skin soft and dry and welcoming. She'd said *Pete, I want you to stay with me, for at least the week. I know how you get.* She'd said, *You carry the world on those shoulders, Peter, I don't want you to add anything else.* And then he'd realized...the snapped spine, the crushed neck, the almost perfect line of twenty-four ribs, her misaligned tailbone, the deformed length of her shoulders....she may have hit the ground but he had snapped her spine.

He'd scrambled away from Aunt May and the hug and executed Gwen's murderer.

May hasn't hugged him like that since.

Across the room, Wade hasn't moved, still stands fixed near the window. He's thumbing absently at the deep scar on the back of his neck.

There's a good minute of silence. Peter stands with his chest hitching, his bones aching, blood still steady down his face.

Finally, when Peter is bursting with it, Wade crosses the room.

He stands quietly in front of Peter, a good five inches taller, and places hands on his shoulders. "Peter," he says, low and quiet and sincere, "I'm sorry for your loss."

"I...thank you." He replies dumbly. His skin is hot and itchy; he's gathered the first strings of his control, and he doesn't want to allow himself the simple ache of missing her, not right now, not after everything he'd just said. He pushes down on the feeling as it wells up his esophagus, static hunger crackling through his innards.

Half of Wade's mouth quirks into a smile. "Are you going to cry?" He asks. "Because I can show you where the bathroom is."

It startles a choking laugh out of Peter, and it's wet enough to morph into a sob. In the end it sends him over the edge.

He wonders if this is what grief really is: something primal, something open in want and desperation, something brutal and threatening and huge. Something so terrible and beautiful that it lies at the root of what makes people human, what brings people together and tears them apart. The last hum of a love song. The creaking dust of a well-loved book.

But this is what healing is:

A single sprig of green in the snow.

A butterfly bandage over a scar.

Chapter End Notes

1. Warnings: there's a non-graphic discussion of suicide between a character who has done so before (DP) and one who has seen it happen before (SM). Also, Peter goes into pretty graphic detail about Gwen's death. Please be alert.
2. Normal canon/fanon suggests Wade as completely oblivious, but he's a killer, and even after the horror that was Weapon X and the mental illness and the craziness that is his life, I still believe that if he put his mind to it, he could figure out SM's identity. Because, come on, suspend your disbelief people, Peter's identity is not rock solid, and if someone wanted to poke around they'd probably connect the dots.
3. Y'all...I've been floored by your response. You're all so attentive and wonderful and thoughtful, and just...wow. I want to be writing this 24/7, but unfortunately updates are going to slow down again. I posted this one early (it still needs an edit or two) so I could at least warn you instead of just disappearing. I wish my engineering degree could study me, rather than the other way around, 'cause damn.

absorb

Chapter Summary

Peter sighed and yanked the mask off, hoping his messy hair would win him some brownie points. “That’s not what I meant. And you know it, Gwen, come on, don’t start with this.”

She cocked an eyebrow, “Don’t start with what?” She asked, a little frantically. Peter removed his gloves and set them down carefully, following with the shooters. She had reached for one of them, and in the careful silence that followed, Peter had felt a lump tighten his throat.

“Is this about--” he trailed off, tossing his mask to the counter.

“No, God, it’s not. Okay?” This was a rare side of Gwen, frazzled, imperfect, anxious.

“It’s fine, Peter, I’m fine. You go out and save New York City and manage to get your homework done in between trying not to get yourself killed, and I’m--I do not need your help, I do not need you to save me. I am perfectly capable of living my own life and making my own decisions.”

Chapter Notes

checks watch has it really been a month? Wowza....times does fly when you’re doing multivariable calculus.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 6 months, 0 weeks, 6 days

“Hullo.” He doesn’t remember his phone ringing but he’s answering it, peeling his lips open and cracking a greeting out.

“Mr. Parker?” It’s the crisp, tired voice of someone familiar, but Peter is way too spent to figure out who it belongs to.

His throat is sore. “Yah.” He manages, unsticking his left arm from where it somehow had been lodged underneath him between his body and the couch. He doesn’t really remember falling asleep, but he slept dreamlessly.

“Good, I’m glad I could reach you. How are you doing this morning?”

Peter peels his eyes open. They’re crusty. He feels like he’s been crying. He also feels like he just spent the night on Deadpool’s stuffy couch. Nice.

“Mr. Parker?” The lady asks again.

“Yeah, yes, good. Um.” He starts, “Sorry, but who is--”

In the background of the phone call he hears, “*No you smarmy egghead these were absolutely not the statistics I wanted you to get me!*” Pause. “*I don’t care what the hell a factual basis is!*”

Ah.

So that answers it.

“What can I help you with, Betty?” He asks instead, combing a hand down his face.

“Actually, Peter, Mr. Jameson just wanted to give you a heads up that you’re no longer--”

“*Betty! Betty get me that nerdy little bastard in my office right this second!*” Jameson is yelling. “*So help me God, if I don’t have a good picture on my desk in fifteen seconds I’ll fire him again!*”

“Did you hear that?” Betty asks blandly. The woman deserves a medal.

“I’m sorry, Betty, what? What’s going on?”

There’s more muffled shouting and fumbling over the line, and then the yelling is right in Peter’s ear. “Junior! We’re back in business. I need you in my office yesterday. I need pics! Pictures! *Pics!*” Jameson starts muttering, “I knew it, I just knew it, a goddamn hazard, nothing that dangerous would be gone for good.”

Peter lets it bounce around in his addled mind a minute. Jameson said he needed pics. All Peter can think of is that this is a very unprofessional and bizarre way of saying *Send Nudes* .

Oh shit. “Oh shit.” he sits up heavily, stomach whirling.

“Oh shit” Jameson agrees excitedly. “Oh shit is right young man. Our favorite foe showed his cocky little face last night and he is *exactly* the person we thought he was.” He mutters again, “Unmask the Man!” Pencil scratching sounds, “The Terror Returns! The Spiderlings Hatch, Horror Ensues!”

He continues, “Listen, I need ten of your shittiest stills of that menace and I need two of them to go online by tonight.” Jameson pauses. “I also need you to tell me which one is Spider-Man in this video.” His voice fades a little, “Yes, Betty, I know what Spider-Man looks like, but both of these jackasses look like impersonations!” And then to Peter, “Do you think he could have started some sort of gang? Mafia? Drug ring.” Cackles. “Oh this is *good* .”

Peter hangs up on him.

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 3 days

Deadpool sends him a link to a BuzzFeed quiz. *Which Spider-Man are You?* He takes it on shift, answers the inane questions about his favorite sex position, his least favorite cheese, and the existence of aliens, and ends up with a blurry picture of himself from the other day. *You’re Problematic Spidey! Nice to see you again!*

He texts Wade back, “I hate you.”

Wade responds almost immediately. “What’d you get? I got Baby Spidey.” He attaches a picture of Peter from when he was sixteen, less muscular, more timid. The suit he’s wearing is two or three designs old, and Peter still has that very same one buried beneath the Christmas decorations in May’s attic.

Peter rolls his eyes and turns off his phone to focus on work.

He thinks later, that it should have hurt more, he should have been offended. Buzzfeed had described Problematic Spidey as an unpleasant and alarming surprise, and the idea of “Baby Spidey” was condescending as hell.

But he’s always found a singular level of comfort in the flippant, and if he retakes the quiz six times until he gets Peak Spider-Man, strong, quip-filled, grinning, then no one has to know but himself.

0 years, 6 months, 1 week, 4 days

“The article the Huffington Post posted this morning just about made me want to cry.” Peter overhears that morning on the subway. It’s packed. He’s standing in the middle, shoved haphazardly between two bright pink coats of middle-aged ladies, who’ve probably taken the day off of work to do something in the city. The car lurches from its stop, screeching, churning, morning in New York City.

“Such a sad and awful thing.” The other agrees, with pity. “Makes you realize.”

“Hmm?”

“You know, just something the Stark press secretary said. We fault our best for being human.”

Peter has no context of the conversation, but he’s sure he knows what they’re talking about.

“You think he doesn’t need to be held to a higher standard?”

The first lady shrugs and Peter accidentally catches her eye for a second, two, three. She smiles at him. He can’t look away.

“I think,” She says, thumbing open her phone and beginning to browse, “That’s what we all fault ourselves for, in the end.”

0 years, 6 months, 3 weeks, 0 days

A lot of cars come and go. He expects that.

What he doesn’t expect is for a tinted black sedan to pull up to the curb in front of him and turn off.

Peter tenses from where he's sitting, his own unease triggering the faintest of his senses.

What Peter *really* doesn't expect is to watch one leg appear, then the other, and then the upper body and torso of one Mary Jane Watson.

She's spotted him, of course. Their childhood houses were less than a foot apart, and Peter is sitting on Aunt May's stoop. He stands quickly, wiping at his eyes. It's a blustery day for late August, and he'd had to walk all the way from his last class of the day to Queens in order to psych himself up for this. That was a few hours ago. Since finding that May didn't open the door, he'd been waiting for her to get back from wherever she went on her front stoop.

"Pete!" MJ calls excitedly from across the front yard. Her voice is warm in a way that he'd fought for tooth and nail in the three years since they broke up.

"MJ." He calls, and belatedly drops his backpack. "Long time." A smile of its own accord lights his face halfway.

She's carrying a few grocery bags, but she flings them around his back as she hugs him, too quick and too light. She pulls away and looks at him, familiar in a way that warms his chest. A pleasant burn.

"Yeah, 'cause you never *call*, dummy. Or visit your aunt, apparently." She pinches him, beaming. She looks past him. "Bony." She accuses, and then, "Were you sitting outside?"

"Uh." He follows her glance.

"Lost your key?" MJ jokes. Peter thumbs the back of his neck. Her face falls. "May is on shift. Did she not tell you? Left a few hours ago. Won't be back until late."

"Uh." he repeats again, and MJ's smile comes back, fixed, a little dimmer.

She doesn't push, though. That's what he'd loved about her in high school. When he'd once pressed his fingers into her arm too hard and too tight before he understood his own strength, when she'd accidentally gotten an elbow into a cracked rib, once when she found Peter's back whipped raw after Spidey had a particularly nasty fight with Electro. She never asked. Even when they were together; she'd prod at it like one would a seeping bruise and then back away, a little bitter, a little sad, but no worse for wear.

She hadn't even asked in April of his senior year before he made his official college decision and she was crying, saying *I'm leaving, leaving, I'm going to LA. Peter, I know what I want.* She'd sobbed, *Peter come with me, Caltech, Stanford, Berkeley. Pete, at least try . Try for me. For once, Peter, let me in.*

He'd already worked through this scenario in his head and had called it the best conclusion. He remembers so clearly the way his own face had quirked into something a little bitter, a little sad, and he'd said. "I'm sorry, MJ."

She didn't ask why. She'd thumbed his day-old bruised lip, kissed his temple, and didn't look back.

Neither had he, really. He knows it should have hurt more, but he loved her in an adolescent way, and his feelings for her had reshaped since that moment in the seventh grade when he'd first realized how beautiful she was. It was never meant to last; they both wanted bigger things. Peter wanted a degree and a spider suit and MJ wanted a west coast posh life and whirlwind career of her own. Their relationship would have inevitably been torn apart by the adult world, by their conflicting goals, by Peter's alternate identity. It doesn't really matter now.

Now, she tangles her fingers in his and beams at him. She looks good. The past three years have modeled her cheekbones higher. Her hair is redder, probably artificial, but her smile is just as infectious.

The pleasant burn-ache-burn in his chest for her lights harder, flares brighter.

“Come inside.” She says brightly, and he does.

0 years, 6 months, 3 weeks, 0 days, 10 hours

He lies on MJ's bed and listens to her bustle around, catching up. She's back visiting. She switched agents last month, and was *this* close to that new Proactiv commercial, you know the one they play at least once every twenty minutes? She was *this close* to really hitting it big. And, oh! She went to a group dinner on Sunset Boulevard and sat next to David Hasselhoff, who is a bit of a bread hog, if MJ is being honest.

Peter is listening, because he cares about MJ. In fact, the magnitude of how much he cares for her scares him. It terrifies him. She's his, and that means there's a chance that she'll leave.

He watches the swirls of her ceiling and listens to her talk about the roles she isn't getting and he remembers.

Beneath him is the same bed and the same pillows and the same sheets that MJ reached for him on. Back then was just nerdy Pete Parker with a Nikon and a foolish wish to change the world, and she was a Watson, constantly on the arm of Flash. But they were neighbors, and months after she'd broken it off with Flash, he'd been sitting in this very same room when she'd closed her mouth over his.

It wasn't just new for him sexually, but emotionally too. They used to sit on the back steps when her parents would fight and Peter didn't know what to do or how to help her. She'd lean into him anyway.

When Ben died, when he got bitten, when the nights got longer, he leaned away.

Now, Peter is lying on the same bed and the same pillows and the same sheets he'd fumbled his way through losing his virginity on. And MJ is sitting at the end of the bed with his toes dug into her thigh, beaming brightly and happy, three years older and wiser and still his friend.

“Are you okay, Pete?” She asks as if she's been working up to it. She looks at him earnestly, hand coming to rest at the hard bone of his ankle. Her thumb slides against the ridge. Her eyes soften.

He wonders what would happen if she slid her hands beneath his shirt like she'd done on prom night after Flash had dumped the punch down his button down. She'd forced him to play his cards or fold, bright and demanding as always, and he'd let her fall across his thighs and tried to breathe in the curve of her neck.

Of their own accord, his knees fold up and MJ stops touching him.

It's like being tossed into a pool of ice water. If she were to do any of that now, because she's single and he's single and they're consenting young adults with a past and a proven ability to get

over the awkward, he's sure he would curl away, would sicken himself with it. He's sure he would grip her too hard by the shoulders, accidentally leave bruises, and leave.

Gwen had *every* part of him, raw and open, good, bad. She'd laid across his chest and told him her deepest secrets, about her cold and shallow relationship with her mother, about her fear of her own ambition, and he'd taste her pulse beneath his lips and murmur his own secrets back into her skin like tattoos. About Ben. About his constant fear of not being enough for her like he wasn't for MJ. About his worry for May living all alone. She was his most intimate moment, physically, emotionally.

It's the first time he's thought about sex or love since Gwen. It hits him now with direct and hard certainty that he will probably have intimacy issues for the rest of his life.

He's scarred in the way that only people he lets inside can injure him, like they'd all taken a chunk of him when they left.

"Have you talked to Harry?" Peter asks instead of answering. "Since you've been back."

MJ smiles sadly. She doesn't reply.

It's enough of an answer for them both.

0 years, 6 months, 3 weeks, 4 days

He has a few missed calls from Stark, of course, but when he checks the first one, it's not Tony at all, just his press manager. The first one is general lecturing, an exasperated and exhausted monotone that makes Peter smile. At the end, she says, "Compared to Tony this is cake. Just keep your head down, kid. You're good at that."

The following one is from Tony, who says, "Two things, one, that's a hell of a left hook, and two, you need anything? Cap says I'm being too pushy, I don't think Cap's being pushy enough. We want you back, Webhead. We want you to want to come back, too. Also, next time you want to throw down with Deadpool let me know. Next time we'll get some actual news coverage, grainy twitter videos just aren't flashy enough, how about that? I owe you one or two, kid."

And a third. "I've been informed--ow dammit, stop that--that my last message was insensitive, so feel free to disregard."

7 months, 0 weeks, 2 days

Peter gets invited to a small get together with a few of the people from last year's Differential Equations class. It's kind of a thing to celebrate "Yay We Don't Have to Take Math Anymore!" but the reason Peter accepts the invite is far more selfish.

He sits next to Tate on the couch and accepts what is probably one of his last underage drinks. It's a shitty mix of filtered Kamchatka and Grenadine that he can't do much more than sip from. Next to him Tate claps him on the back and talks about "that fucking final" and that one homework that

had “beat the shit out of” him.

Peter smiles, privately, and toasts the hill he’d struggled over, and then they all toast the math class.

7 months, 0 weeks, 4 days

He really would like to put down his reaction to the sixth month anniversary of her death and never, ever think about how bad it got (hence the tentative reach out to May, the toast at the party), but there’s one person who doesn’t want him to.

Peter doesn’t jump when Deadpool materializes beside him, despite the hour and the amount of distance he is from his apartment. He’s known he was being followed for four blocks, and just figured Wade needed some time to gather up his courage.

“Hey?” Peter says. He was under the impression that whole I’m-Monitoring-You-But-Not-Telling-SHIELD-Who-You-Are and Oh-Shit-You’re-Kinda-Fucked-Up (the latter of which the *Bugle* had fucking *ran with* , and still hasn’t dropped) was the end of their relationship.

“You didn’t give me a whole lot of room to talk the other--”

“I’m sorry I unloaded all of that on you.” Peter cuts in. He’s irritated and exhausted and not exactly chomping at the bit to relive the moment. “I needed someone to know, I guess, and it wa--”

Wade’s voice develops an edge of dark excitement, “No, oh my God, but can I--”

“--was not my finest moment--”

“--just say *one* thing without you getting all defensive, I mean--”

“I am *not* defensive.”

“Yes you are, it’s okay, you’re fragile, you’re excused.”

Peter groans. “I want to punch you again.”

“That is a valid reaction, but just--” Peter quickens his pace, and Wade catches him by the backpack. “Consider this.”

Peter stops and turns, planting one hand on his waist.

Wade has one hand at the back of his neck. The streetlights wash his uniform orange.

“Just--” He takes a deep breath through his nose. “There is a difference,” He says importantly, “Between killing someone and not being able to save them.”

Something whooshes out of him. It might be air. It feels cold.

Wade shrugs. “I just think you might want to think about that.”

Peter stands blinking for a moment, taken off guard. His mouth feels dry. The world goes gray to

technicolor. Static blood hisses in the tips of his extremities.

“Think about that.” Peter repeats thickly, tasting the arch of the words in his mouth.

Seconds pass.

Deadpool, the regular chatty Cathy, has gone silent, and Peter is thinking about the mutilated twist of Gwen’s bones beneath her skin.

He chokes for a second more on his words.

“What,” Peter begins slowly, enunciating, “Do you even know about *saving* someone, anyway?”

Wade pauses, surprised and a little hurt. “I--what?” His reaction is pure, genuine.

Peter snorts, cut. “I didn’t tell you all that just so you could act like you understand” Jesus, what was he thinking, telling Wade all that shit? That he would understand? That he could look past the hero worship and understand that underneath the suit Spider-Man is a royal fuck up like the rest? Spider-Man was an ideal, a false god, and why is Peter and the damn Bugle the only ones that know that?

Wade lets go of Peter’s backpack. “You--” He sounds astonished. “I’m not heartless.”

“You murder people regularly. For money.”

It’s not fair, it’s not *fair*, not at all, but neither is this, is any of it. It’s not *fair* that Gwen lost her life before she could live it, it’s not *fair* that May is stuck with a sole remaining family member that cannot let her in, it’s not *fair* that some days it rains too much and causes mudslides and floods and hurricanes and death and terror when California is going on year four of a drought and children in countries no one wants to talk about seep water from the mud and instead of drowning they die of famine and dehydration.

Wade has spent the entirety of his adult life running from his own bad decisions and so has Peter, but in the end the blood doesn’t quite wash off. Life’s not fair, and Peter is under no obligation to be fair in it’s place.

Wade takes a step back. His mask clears. “You’re a dick.” It comes out high at the end, almost like a question. Wade has air behind his words.

“It’s not like--”

“No, I mean, you are a *dick* .” Deadpool hisses, anger covering the pain, his voice growing more assured. His arms cross in front of his chest. “I have no idea what your problem is dude. I don’t know if it’s your inability to learn from any of your own actions or your absolutely shitty self worth, but damn! You actually get off on making yourself seem better than everyone else around you.”

“That’s not true.”

“I am trying to *help* you.”

Peter takes the bait. “Why? Because of your crush on Spider-Man? I didn’t *ask* for your help. What’s in this for you?”

“Not a whole hell of a lot, Peter.” Wade answers tightly.

Peter spreads out his hands. “So just leave me alone.”

It’s not fair that he gets to wake up in the morning and have screaming matches in the street at night with masked vigilantes when Gwen is *rotting*. It’s not fair to let her memory turn into a blush, a brushed off, “it was an accident, I didn’t mean it, hey, man, at least I tried.”

“You missed the entire point, didn’t you. Figures.” Wade shakes his head. “I am the best friend you have right now, you know that right?” He swears. “You are such an asshole.”

“Don’t.” Peter waves him away and turns. Begins to walk.

“You’re so fucking sanctimonious, Spidey.” Wade spits at the back of Peter’s head. “There is a *difference*,” He says again, “Between killing someone and not being able to save them.”

“Bite me.” Peter snaps, louder. Her back presses sickeningly into his arms, and he’s sobbing her name. He’s falling, downward, gravity pulling him, and his web thumps into her and he yanks, *he yanks*.

“You’re not special because you’re sad! Fucking martyr!” Wade is yelling now. Peter is far enough away for that to be necessary. “This isn’t any different because of the suit. You’re still the same jackass that you were when you were Spider-Man.”

Peter reels around, throwing his hands up. “Maybe that’s just me, did you ever think of that?”

“Hypocritical, judgemental, *neurotic* --”

“Not anything new, Wade.”

“And for all your fucking posturing, you refuse to let anyone save *you*.” Wade spits, fingers clenched into black little balls. “And I don’t know a goddamned thing about saving someone.” His shoulders sag, slightly. He waves Peter off. “Fuck you, Parker.” He says, the rebuke the most sincere thing that Peter has ever heard come out of his mouth. “She was dead either way.”

0 years, 7 months, 0 weeks, 6 days

There is a difference between killing someone and not being able to save them.

“Hey,” Peter says into the phone. “I’m sorry, okay. Just...call me back.”

He hangs up.

She was dead either way.

Peter has no idea what that was supposed to mean.

0 years, 7 months, 3 weeks, 6 days

May is different around him, now. They made up weeks ago, but she still treats him as she would a sharpened knife. He's proved his own anger, will snap against the people that know him best. His grip is tentative and that's the only way he has to hold on.

She's watching the evening news while he's spread out on the floor with his homework from his general education political studies requirement, a class called Interworld Order: A Study of Superhumans and their Political Pull (it was...not his first choice. Thank you, changing Empire Engineering curriculum and last minute schedule changes!)

He has to finish the book he's reading by Friday, a hundred dollar tome about a single interview with Thor and his description of the intricate webs of politics between the nine realms. The author is a journalist that Peter has actually met, once, back when he was first on at the Bugle and superhumans sold the most papers.

He thumbs idly at the header for Chapter 13, pen clapping against his spiral bound half full of notes.

"Do you want to do dinner, on Friday?" He asks at May, not looking at her.

"I'd like that." May replies idly. The news drones on in the background.

He reads for a little more. The anchor on TV starts talking about the Dow.

May flicks off the screen, and all that's left for Peter to read by is the dull thick glow of the lamp on the coffee table. "I'm headed to bed." May comments. He waits for a moment for the *don't stay up too late* or the *don't work too hard* but it doesn't come.

Peter swallows it for a few seconds, but he knows what he should say.

She's at the foot of the stairs when he calls, "Hey May?" The bubbling emotion inside him is not dissimilar to what he felt when he was scrambling on the rooftop with Deadpool, ragged and unable to breath. "I just--I don't want to lose you."

She turns around to peer at him, eyes bright in the soft glow.

He thinks about the warm swelling he felt with MJ, that he feels now. "If I...if I don't have anyone." He manages, keeping eye contact, honest with her for the first time in months, "Then I don't lose anyone."

"Peter." She says with pity. "That's not how it works."

He looks down and doesn't contradict her. He cannot poison others if he keeps them at a distance. "I'm um." He smiles, but it is a twisted expression. "I'm really struggling right now."

It's an admittance, an honesty they both feel.

She nods at him, like a thank you.

"Get some sleep, Peter." She says.

0 years, 8 months, 0 weeks, 1 day

“Peter! Peter, hey.” His lab partner snaps. She stills his wrist. “Thirteen millimeters.”

He glances down at the test tube. “Right.” He says.

Maya looks at him. She knew Gwen, too, once upon a time. “Here.” She says, “I’ll do it.”

0 years, 8 months, 0 weeks, 2 days

The concept of infinity isn’t something he’s extensively thought about. In his Calculus 3 course spring semester of his freshman year, they’d once spent an entire 55 minute lecture going down that rabbit hole. It ended with the professor saying that even with her PhD she couldn’t answer their question, so please, can they just get back to series and summations?

Mathematically, infinity is not a number. Finite numbers cannot be added or subtracted from it. Infinity cannot be divided by infinity or subtracted from itself. There is no barrier between the finite and the infinite. Once you cross infinity no adding or multiplying or subtracting can get you out.

His scientific understanding of the concept is of a murky void. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, and it won’t, to the human mind. It’s difficult to process things that cannot be touched or envisioned.

He’s three days late to Gwen’s grave for the month. He had a big quiz on the second and wanted to study.

When he gets there, he lays down the rose and murmurs, “Sorry, Gwen, I’m sorry I’m late.” He straightens and feels incredibly stupid for talking to her when she’s not there.

“I’ve been thinking about infinity.” He tells her. *Shut up*, he’s thinking, but he doesn’t. This is the first conversation he’s had with her in eight months and it feels good, in some weird and interrupted way, to address her like she might still be listening.

“If you take out the math part of it and get flowery,” He says. Gwen had always pretended she hated the dumbing down of scientific theory to make romance, to make a story, to make beauty, but Peter knew she secretly loved it, the melding of hard fact and cold theory to the heart and mind, warm skin. “And if I was some kind of...struggling playwright.” He laughs. (It’s an inside joke.) “Then I’d tell you that love is one of the only things that can breach it. The only infinite finite thing.”

He sighs. His eyes are dry, his throat is open. He feels...almost normal.

“I think it’s time, Gwen Stacy.” He tells her, eyes tracing over her headstone, granite in the sun. It’s getting cold again. Halloween approaches in the close distance, another holiday that he will struggle through. Last year she dressed up as a failed Scantron and gotten so drunk with him and their friends that he’d had to hold her hair. She’d apologized for it, because at the time he’d been annoyed. He doesn’t really remember his reasoning, for that one.

“If you’re listening, wherever you are.” And his throat starts to close, but he expects it. It’s not easier, he knows, but the sadness is comfortable. It’s *there*. “I love you.” Peter says, and leaves it at that.

0 years, 8 months, 0 weeks, 3 days

He pinches his nose between his fingers.

It's cold on the rooftop, and his eyes are cracked. He doesn't feel like running tonight, too exhausted, too tired to move, but not tired enough to sleep.

Instead he watches the city waver in the nighttime like he used to, perched on the balls of his feet. It's a long drop below him, but he'll stick. He always has.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket. It's on it's last dredges of battery, but he puts in the call anyway. It goes to voicemail.

"Hey" Peter tells the dead air. Below him a slow silhouette meanders up the street, out too late and walking too slow to be up to anything good.

"Please talk to me." It's a role reversal, and he's never felt more hypocritical than he feels right at this moment.

0 years, 8 months, 1 week, 5 days

In lab Maya says something snide about it, a whispered cut of rolled-eyes about a lecture that Peter missed because he hadn't been able to get out of bed. About being given things versus working hard for things.

He finds an anger within himself that's over eight months dry.

He's not entirely an ass, and he understands that STEM fields are not always focused on female success. Gwen used to take it *so personally*, though, like every school-related piece of advice that Peter had given her was his way of trying to declare himself smarter than her. Her sore spot had always been her ego; she wanted to be smart and she wanted to be considered the smartest.

Peter had never believed that because of her gender she was not as smart as him. That was never the problem. The problem was that Gwen was an anxious test-taker and an overachiever to a fault, and school was one of the only things she had to care about.

They had a blow out about it, once. They were freshman, just over the raw beginning of their relationship and into the gritty meat of it. She'd been working a dynamics problem. It was after midnight and Gwen was perched at the counter, her iHome long since dead. He'd crawled through the window to her apartment, sweaty and full of adrenaline.

She was into the meat of the problem, more than halfway to getting the answer. It was a massed pulley-pendulum problem, a capstone of rotational mechanics, torque, and conservation of energy.

He'd pulled his mask to his nose and drank orange juice straight from the carton. Swallowing, he asked, "Can I help you with anything? I want to take you to bed."

It had...not been the right thing to say.

When Peter is not dealing with stunning and stunting emotional grief, he has a foot-in-mouth curse, which he's always believed to be an extension of the Parker luck. (Really, sometimes his cute-awkward is just plain awkward-awkward.) "Not to brag," He'd grinned, ignorant of the hateful look she'd sent his way, "But I'm a bit of a pendulum expert."

He sent a playful web to her book, hooking itself to the page.

She'd slammed the book shut around it. "Why don't you just do all of my work for me, Peter? Since I do it so slowly?" She yanked the book and snapped the web. "That way we could screw around more."

He paused, sweat cooling at the dip in his spine, his elbows. "What?"

She looked at him fully, eyes a little sunken in, hair piled messily on top of her head the way she did it for long study binges. She shook her head. "I don't need your help."

Peter sighed and yanked the mask off, hoping his messy hair would win him some brownie points. "That's not what I meant. And you know it, Gwen, come on, don't start with this."

She cocked an eyebrow, "Don't start with what?" She asked, a little frantically. Peter removed his gloves and set them down carefully, following with the shooters. She had reached for one of them, and in the careful silence that followed, Peter had felt a lump tighten his throat.

"Is this about--" he trailed off, tossing his mask to the counter.

"No, God, it's not. Okay?" This was a rare side of Gwen, frazzled, imperfect, anxious. "It's fine, Peter, I'm fine. You go out and save New York City and manage to get your homework done in between trying not to get yourself killed, and I'm--I do not need your help, I do not need you to save me. I am perfectly capable of living my own life and making my own decisions."

"Gwen. Gwennie." He'd started, slowly. "I'm just *really* good at the smile and deflect. It's not easy. Trust me, okay? When I was sixteen, I--" He stopped. She knew this story. He didn't need to rehash it now, in the pre-dawn darkness of Gwen's kitchen. "You just have to remember what you're doing this for. Don't lose sight of it."

"That's so easy for you to say, Peter. So *easy*." The poison was back in her words. "Stop condescending to me."

Peter blanched. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

He turned his head and swore, irritated. Gwen and him were equals, partners. She was his best friend, knew him better than anyone else in the entire world, and yet she still--

"Do you want me to leave?" He'd asked her dully, scooping on a shooter, clenching it around his wrist. Back then he used to retreat into the suit, used to mold himself into it to make his real life not as hard, to make the anxiety and guilt and the fear crush together underneath strength, victory, heroism.

"That's what you do best." She'd said.

Peter reeled back, stung. "I thought you were okay with this, Gwen." The beginnings of panic

stung his eyes. “I thought you understood. This is who I am. This is who I’ve been since I was sixteen and gotten bitten by a fucking spider, since I got my Uncle killed, since I realized that I have a responsibility to him to give back. Do not ask me to--”

“Peter, that’s not what I--”

“Do not ask me to chose because I *can’t*, Gwen. I can’t chose between you and myself because it would *rip me apart*, do you understand that?” he told her. “If I lost you I’d never recover” he asserted, “And if I lost Spider-Man I’d never forgive myself.”

At the time, he had not even entertained the thought of losing them both.

0 years, 8 months, 2 weeks, 4 days

This was a bad idea.

He’s not sure what he’s thinking, something along the lines of his last call to Wade hadn’t gone to voicemail, had just rang and rang and rang. Something about the difference between killing someone and failing to save them. Something about breaking down in the dim light of a Wade’s apartment, finally admitting to himself that he is *wrong*, finally making Gwen’s death into something less technicolor and confusing and more visible, visceral, physical.

Something about the way he doesn’t run at night, just watches, listens, *feels*.

It’s a bad, bad idea.

He awoke half an hour ago still thinking she was alive, and today is a Bad Day. He’d scrambled into converse and acceptable jeans, a checkered button shirt, and taken the train into Manhattan, closing his eyes the whole way. He’s still got bedhead and his knees are bobbing up and down. His glasses sit wrong on his nose.

“Peter Parker.” His head snaps up. The secretary greets him with a bland smile and a right-this-way. She’s not impressed. It’s okay. Peter isn’t that impressive anymore.

He’s on the phone in the corner. It’s a social call. Peter can’t tell exactly who he’s talking to, but he can hazard a guess by just the fond condescension in his voice. “...busy right now, can’t you just lift something heavy and wait to talk to him when I finish with these brat interns?”

There’s an indignant huff on the other side of the line.

“Look, jackass,” He says, still fond, and Peter fights from rolling his eyes. “Twenty minutes. Jesus.” The other man clicks off, buttons his suit coat.

He turns, offering a hand, “Good morning. I’m Tony...” He starts on automatic and then cuts off with a soft gasp, “Parker?”

“Funny.” Peter says, tasting something awful in his mouth, watching Tony’s face contort. “I thought you were a Stark.”

Chapter End Notes

i had an exam today and one on monday so this is probably the best edited it's going to be for at least the weekend. sorry dudes.

heat

Chapter Summary

He looks at his own face. (He sticks his hand inside the mask). Mirrored eye pieces, wrapped in red, blue. (Was it stupid? To put on a suit and serve a cause bigger than himself?)

That's him, he's looking at. It's him in the picture. Him in the mask.

Chapter Notes

picture new avengers team and movie team. pre civil war for obvious reasons (i physically cannot add any more angst to this)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 8 months, 2 weeks, 4 days

Gwen had almost gone to UC Berkeley. She'd gotten into other places, as well: NYU, Rutgers, Clemson, Cornell, and half of the Big Ten schools, gotten deferrals and later rejections from MIT, Harvard, and Columbia. In a harried frenzy of worry, she'd applied to almost any school that offered a half-decent bio program, didn't care, just wanted to get in.

But Berkeley was her number one, a cross-country escape that she'd yearned for and still did until her death. It's why she wanted to go to med school at Oxford, had a giant poster of the spires of Cambridge plastered on the wall behind her bed.

She'd joked (bitterly, always bitterly) that it was fate that she ended up at Empire State instead. It was simple fate that pulled her there, pulled her to Peter. Ivy's don't give out scholarships and the state schools that did were too far away from her mother, who was clingy and worried and *safe*. Ohio State had a blossoming biomedical sciences program, elite and growing with attention, and she'd gotten a full ride there. She'd gotten half tuition *and* the promise of a research position at the experimental hospital at UChicago.

Peter thinks he still has his MIT acceptance somewhere in his room, remembers the day he got accepted. It had been the single most validating moment in his seventeen years, a soft *Congratulations Mr. Parker* printed on thick cardstock.

Gwen didn't go to her first choice schools because her mom guilted her out of it, because she knew the distance would tear her family up. (And...then she met Peter.)

Peter didn't go to his first choice college because he couldn't afford it. He didn't want to touch his

uncle's life insurance, and there wasn't enough of it anyway. His aunt was already working her fingers to the bone. Peter spent too much of his time gallivanting through the night to hold down a well-paid, consistent part-time job.

Peter applied to five colleges and got into them all. Columbia University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Empire State University, New York University, and Purdue University. Financial Aid offered him the promise of debt until Spidey got him killed or he died of old age.

Tony Stark offered him *everything*.

Stark was an MIT prodigy, but in high school he took co-credit classes at E State, and apparently has some secret, deep-down fondness for campus, because he offers five full-tuition, room and board scholarships, which includes a freshman year internship, and a work-study R&D program for juniors. His year, Peter was the recipient of one of them. He's a Maria Stark Foundation Scholar. His education is free.

In the end, it wasn't a choice. The MIT letter got placed carefully between the pages of a book he never reads, he convinced Aunt May to stop with the spreadsheets and the planning and the gentle encouragements. He broke up with MJ.

Even now, it's a kind of sick hurt that breeds bacteria in his stomach, a regret so bitter he tastes it walking through the quad, after tests so hard his eyes hurt in their sockets, when he reads the Facebook posts of half-acquaintances with rich parents who are arguably doing the exact same thing as himself

When scholarship applications went in--and Peter is not very proud of this--he used his double life to ascertain his spot. Sharing a post-Doombot grilled cheese with Jessica, he'd goaded Tony into the subject of scholarship recipients, and said. "I know Peter Parker applied."

He knew, he *knew*, that establishing a more solid bond between Peter Parker and Spider-Man was a danger. He knew that Spider-Man gave Tony all-access to Peter, and Peter gave Tony all-access to Spider-Man. Not only does it weaken his identity, but it gave Tony an excuse to pester Peter about Spidey's new suit design at the Maria Stark Foundation yearly gala, and an excuse for Tony to ask Spidey about "how the ol' E State" is doing. In the two years since receiving the scholarship, both have happened.

Anyway, Tony who was at the time doing recalculations when his suit was still on and still smoldering, grunted, "Who?"

Spider-Man shrugged and feigned nonchalance. "Guy who made my shooters."

Tony's head shot up and with gathered confidence and greasy gloved fingers, Peter had eased off his left web-shooter and tossed it over.

Spider-Man had never allowed Tony to touch the technology, so with a certain sort of morbid glee Tony set to taking the tech apart, seeing how it worked, seeing where it had stress flaws and stalled mechanisms. Peter blushed under the scrutiny, but in the end Tony had just whistled and Peter got the scholarship.

In the two plus years since finagling his way into Tony Stark's tech little heart, he's been sure to keep a small professional relationship between his Parker image and Stark. It's not a thing that can *hurt*. Especially if he wants to work in a genetics research lab before he turns 23. What's better than the Mutant Devision at SI? And further, knowing arguably the most famous man in the world can get you *far*.

Like now.

“I don’t like this.” Tony says irritably beside him, fiddling with the cuffs of his shirt.

Peter fights rolling his eyes. Just because he still religiously reads the *Wired* articles about SI doesn’t mean he still worships the ground Stark walks on. (Mostly.) “I’m sorry, Mr. Stark. This is important.”

“No I mean, you’re scrawny, nerdy, probably got bullied a lot. And what you’re asking me?” Tony laughs, and it sounds genuine. “I’m just saying, if you try to take over the world or are Doom’s new partner in crime or want to bring about the skrulls, then I’ll probably actually get an ‘I told you so’ from Hill, which would be a first. She never actually says it. Just gives you that look.”

“You don’t have to trust me--”

“I just have to trust Spider-Man.” Tony finishes, “Yeah, I got it.” He’s grumbling, insolent. “For all I know you’ve killed him and are stashing him in the freezer.”

It’s low enough that Peter was probably not meant to hear it, but he replies anyway. “He’s getting your messages.”

Tony stops short.

“I--what?” He says, fixing the planes of his face to cover the surprise. “Maybe *you’re* getting my messages. Spidey can’t answer the phone from the freezer.”

The elevator announces their coming arrival with a ding.

Peter gestures to himself, his untied laces, unruly hair, the sweat on the bridge of his nose beneath the nosepiece of his glasses. “For all you know,” He says, as the elevator slides open, “This is his message back.”

0 years, 8 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 16 hours

Barton is picking his teeth with an explosive arrow, sprawled on the couch wearing a ratty Iowa State sweatshirt and joggers that Peter is almost *certain* belong to Natasha. Next to him Natasha is in full gear, her wet boots pulled up to the couch. She’s on the phone, her voice snappish and irritated in a different language. She absently smacks out at Clint, who grumbles and changes the channel to back to the Travel channel, which is playing Ghost Adventures.

Tony leads him past the living room with a quiet huff and a few spoken words to Jarvis, who hovers and then disappears.

They near the kitchen, and inside Peter hears something crash, and then a few angry, absolutely vile cuss words from a gruff voice. That’s Logan, then, though when Spider-Man was still around Wolverine had not wanted to move in. He’d been pretty vocal about resisting, too, something about the X-Men and not wanting to be a team player again. Peter doesn’t remember the finer details; he wasn’t technically on the team either.

Peter, distracted, runs hip-first into the corner table in the hall, something he has very patently

done before, and it makes him stop short.

Tony doesn't notice--somewhere in the last few seconds he'd gotten a phone call--but Peter stops following him.

He gets that same feeling in his chest that he gets whenever he thinks about the MIT letter, stashed away, gone but not forgotten. Regret, strong like cheap perfume, clogs his pores. It seizes through him instantly, and he misses it. He *misses* this, the team, the post-battle naps on the plush carpet of the mansion living room, the careful line he'd painted between joining the team and being on his own. He misses the casual at-your-back attitude that lingers in the corners of this space, the confidence of doing the right thing and doing it with a family of people that believe in you, too. It's not something that can be translated between phone calls or desperate text messages.

"Parker!" Tony calls from down the hallway. "You're not robbing me, are you?"

"We're being robbed?" Clint responds before Peter can, tossing a look at Peter from behind the couch. His face ticks. Confused. "Ballsy." He says to Peter.

"I'm--"

"Stark, stop bringin' home all these fuckin' strays." Logan emerges from the kitchen with an obscenely large sandwich stacked on the plate. He pauses to leer at Peter. "The fuck you looking at?" Logan challenges, and it makes laughter bubble up in Peter's chest, half-manic, half relieved.

"Cap's not here." Stark says, suddenly behind Peter. "If that's who you're looking for. Press junket or something. They don't let Barton or me or Sunshine over there do it anymore."

"Bite me." Logan says, and Clint is too busy getting smacked by Natasha and turning the channel back to Ghost Adventures to reply.

"I was actually looking for Wolverine." Peter replies dryly, and behind him Tony cracks up. Logan rolls his eyes and mutters something, moving to collapse on the couch adjacent to Natasha. He starts to complain about the TV show, and Natasha tells him to kiss her ass, the only English words out of her mouth.

"C'mon Parker. I gotta get back to work." Tony crooks his fingers impatiently.

Peter reluctantly tears his eyes away from the people he one bled on and bled for and follows Tony down the hall.

0 years, 8 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 21 hours

Tony explained when he led Peter to the room that he'd bugged SHIELD a very long time ago, and had coded it to be as discreet as possible. He can't guarantee that Peter rooting around their servers won't be noticed, but Peter is not that worried about breaking federal law. Partly because by default Tony Stark is breaking federal law, too, and he's fairly certain SHIELD isn't going to put him in prison.

He looks for a while.

His file doesn't surprise him. There's a detailed incident report of his first run-in with an agent, his first fight beside the Avengers. They have him mapped from December of his sophomore year, just two months after he got the bite. There is a separate file on Peter Parker, whose dossier is not as thick, and mostly full of stills from the *Bugle*, dated and marked by the corresponding incident report in Spidey's file. There is one document that seems to point to Peter Parker at least knowing who Spidey is. It's back when Doc Ock was on the rampage and Peter got swept up in pictures; the agent that wrote it makes a case that Peter *is* Spider-Man, but it's made clear that it's speculation, and to SHIELD, it won't even matter until it needs to matter. The report mostly points that Peter and Spidey are close, which is good enough. It's hard to worry about maintaining his secret identity when the two are so hopelessly tangled in one another and one is dead.

Peter goes back to Spidey's file to read each report. Spider-Man stops a sexual assault. Spider-Man eats a hot dog at the corner of 107th and Columbus, almost gets nabbed for loitering, but distracts the police with a pun.

Spider-Man debriefs after the fire that took down that building in the East Bronx a year and a half ago. His fingers shake, the agent notes, his voice chunky with smoke. He got those kids out but smoke inhalation stopped the younger one's heart.

He has to take a breath after that, fitting his teeth into the thin skin that connects his thumb and pointer finger. It reminds him of drowning, a little, floundering. Lost, like he has been for eight long months. Like a high chord on a piano, drifting off into silence. His knee starts to bob, up, down, nervous energy he wants to burn off.

Nine months ago Peter spread his whole life in front of him, cupped his mask in his hand and looked down at himself. He'd thought, naively, that that was it, that he required little self-reflection past that of what grief colored him to look like. Now he's not so sure. Now he aches about Gwen during the day, and about everyone else at night.

Maybe Deadpool was right, crazy as it sounds. Peter is a mutant with powers he still hasn't fully explored, and because of that he has *never* given himself any leeway.

What Peter wants more than anything was to never have started this in the first place, to stay ignorant to the horrors of night time New York alleyways, to go to school and work and return home and watch *Shameless* with Gwen's head on his shoulder, not even blinking about the people he is not saving.

But if he's learning nothing in the past nine months--hell, in the last two years--is two separate lessons.

The past is undoable.

And.

Death is cold, and you do it alone.

He wonders what Ben would think, what Ben would have told him upon discovering that his own death pushed his nephew into a mask and a new life.

"What are you even looking for?" Tony asks, making Peter start. It's been hours since he's been left alone with himself and all the knowledge that SHIELD has on Spider-Man.

Peter lowers his neck. It's sore already. "I don't know." He answers truthfully.

"Sounds like a lie." He feels Tony's eyes. "Why does Spider-Man want you to root around in *his*

file?" Tony asks slowly, and Peter feels flush gathering at the base of his throat. "Why couldn't Spider-Man come in here and do this himself?"

Peter doesn't respond. He's looking at crime scene photos from the 99th precinct. Time stamped three days before Gwen's death. There's a woman in an alley and she's....and she's been....

The photos are attached to Spider-Man's file because the crime fits the profile of a guy Spider-Man caught a few years ago, a man who went through the system and was forgotten about, a man who stopped checking in with his parole officer, a man who got out of prison far too early.

There is a difference between killing someone and not saving them.

Peter cups his hand around his jaw and forces himself to memorize the ripped seam of her jeans, the open stretch of her palms, the blood. Is this his tragedy, too?

He wonders, with a terrible, gruesome suddenness, if this man has been found yet.

Peter feels Tony's eyes on the back of his neck, but he can't look away from the photos, can't respond.

Tony blows out a long breath behind him. "I have something for you. Stop by my lab before you leave." He says, shoving away from the table.

0 years, 8 months, 2 weeks, 4 days, 22 hours

His file tells him that Deadpool quit. There's no information as to where he is now, just the few files he wrote about their encounters, a notice of employee termination.

Peter navigates to Deadpool's electronic file; before he can stop himself, he's there. Spread out in front of him is the data that makes up Wade, the ones and zeros that form his computational image. Peter doesn't read them, just notices his name (Wade Wilson), alias (Deadpool), status (Unknown), threat level, (Orange) and feels sick.

Back on his page, he sees his threat level (Yellow-Green), status (Unknown), alias (Spider-Man) and name (Unknown). He looks at his own face. (He sticks his hand inside the mask). Mirrored eye pieces, wrapped in red, blue. (Was it stupid? To put on a suit and serve a cause bigger than himself?)

That's him, he's looking at. It's him in the picture. Him in the mask.

0 years, 8 months, 3 weeks, 6 days

"....you, Peter?" Dr. Saunders asks him. She's peering at him with dark eyes over the square rims of her glasses. For his Interworld Order Poly Sci class he has to do an individual deposition with her, and he should be paying attention to her question, but he's wearing the jacket he wore to Avengers mansion, and the small black box of web fluid that Tony gave him before he left is still in the pocket, full, unused, pure.

Tony had told him Spidey left a few extras in the mansion for emergencies, and Tony didn't want to keep it anymore. So he'd tossed it to Peter and told Peter to get out.

"I'm sorry," his thumb slides over the side of the cartridge. *Spring constant*, he's thinking, *lower the spring constant, get something spongier that still gets the tension but has more give*. If the sudden stop snapped her spine then make the stop less sudden. "Could you repeat the question?"

Dr. Saunders smiles. She thinks he doesn't understand. She rephrases. "Explain the impact of counterterrorism methods brought about since the dissolution of the alliance with Latveria and Victor Von Doom."

"Well," he replies. In his pocket, he reaches the kick switch and opens the cartridge. He feels the sloppy weight of the inner pocket of the device in his hand, feels the unbonded fluid slide underneath plastic as he plays with it. "I'm assuming by terrorism you mean Doombots." He gives a wry smile. This is something he knows. He guesses Spider-Man was good for something, after all.

0 years, 9 months, 0 weeks, 3 days

"Are you stopping by this weekend?" May asks him. His phone is on top of the fridge on speaker.

Peter fits his chin in his hand. He's perched on top of the door into his bedroom, looking at the mess that is his kitchen. "Hopefully. Maya and I have a lab report due next week, but if she gets her part done on time, it shouldn't be a problem."

Peter extends a sockless toe toward the nearest web. It's not much of a reach, as his kitchen has probably twenty webs stretching from one end to the other. This one, labeled A, wisps apart almost as soon as Peter gets his toe on it. He lurches forward, off balance, and catches himself.

"Do you think she will? I want to make you a nice birthday dinner." May says.

Peter writes down a few notes in his composition notebook about strand A. "She's not as efficient as..." He cuts himself off, pencil pausing on the page. "As Gwen." He forces. "She was the best lab partner I've ever had."

May doesn't reply in the first two seconds, so Peter barrels on.

"Remember how we both took the same section of Gen Chem together?" Peter asks. Gwen had insisted on taking point on lab days, and had dragged his unwilling ass through the post-lab requirements most of the time.

He remembers once sitting at his own table, typing away at a Results and Discussion section while she had her feet in his lap, reading a Cosmo from a subscription that she had somehow signed Peter up for.

"Ooh Peter," She'd said, joking, making fun of him. "'How to Make your Sex Life Super.' Do you think we need the help, or do you have it covered?"

He had grunted, "The standard deviation of potassium hypochlorite titrated was high, indicating that--"

“The weak base was too weak. Hey, they’re doing a second annual Hot Guys with Small Puppies next month!”

“Get your feet off of my lap.”

“Grumpy.”

“I hate you.”

She’d grinned. “Are you done yet?”

“No.”

“Well,” She’d shrugged, still teasing. “Some lab partner you are.”

Now, perched on the door, testing out sample A through T of web fluid in his kitchen (he’d put them in the microwave for varying amounts of time. Peter thinks heat treatment will change the composition enough to get him springier webs. He’s mildly proud of himself for this experiment.), he clears his throat. “We ended up getting a 95 in lab that semester.”

“She was a bright girl.” May tries, which pretty much kicks him in the stomach. He clutches the notebook full of data tighter and closes his eyes.

“Yeah.” He scrambles to change the subject. “Since I’ll be 21, I’m expecting Bloody Marys at brunch.”

May laughs. “Pete, sweetheart, you’ll always be eight years old to your aunt, don’t you know that?”

“Yeah.” He tries. It falls very flat.

0 years, 9 months, 1 week, 6 days

On the night of his 21st birthday, Peter gets really drunk.

He doesn’t go out, just buys a bottle of vodka from Rahid and downs it. He’s not a fan of the feeling, too buzzed to get a good read on his senses. They’re in overdrive. He has very little control.

Hunched over the toilet in the small corner between it and the shower stall, he tastes the first drops of salt since his breakdown three months ago.

It’s pathetic.

He just wants this feeling to go away, and it hasn’t, it won’t. He doesn’t want to be alone anymore, doesn’t want to *feel* her anymore.

He’d settle for warm muscle to sink his fingernails into, for someone to call his bullshit, to see is open vulnerabilities and tell them it’s okay to feel them. He’d settle for something to beat up, a physical representation of his frustration. The point is: Peter would settle, if he could, if it was even possible.

He's not even sure what hurts anymore, just that it does. Time hasn't lessened the guilt, just sharpened it, and Peter is exhausted. Gwen isn't coming back, and he's not sure when he's finally going to accept it.

0 years, 9 months, 2 weeks, 1 day

Ironically, he finds, it's fire that gives him what he wants. Oxidation, to be exact, which fundamentally changes the molecules of the fluid that make them act in a way not dissimilar to human muscles. Expand, contract, fray, snap. His calculations tell him he'll bounce a little if he swings, but it's worth it, in a way.

He scrapes the cartridge that killed Gwen from the bottom of the ashen trash can and clicks in in.

Peter tosses himself out the window.

True to prediction, the fire has loosened the bonds and slows his impulse as the web pulls taught, but then it's still lowering, still giving, giving, giving, and to stop himself he throws his weight to try to swing, because his apartment is fifteen stories high, and while the web is slowing his fall, the ground will still hurt.

He's not wearing another shooter, so he rams into the brick of the next building, and the web snaps.

He falls.

The concrete meets him fast, too fast, and some split-second thought tells him that he's intensely glad that Gwen didn't fall this way, that Gwen's last memory was of him, was of him trying to save her, not of what he had brought her to.

He doesn't ponder the thought for long, or at all, in fact, because something in his chest snaps, a blood hot pain fractures his vision, and the world goes dark.

0 years, 9 months, 2 weeks, 2 days

When he wakes, the sun is up so high in the sky it's blinding, his head is tacky with his own blood, and he thinks he's dead.

Unbothered, Peter lifts his hand to glare at the shooter. "Too much fire." He notes. He'll write it down later. It was probably stupid to test this early anyway. It was also probably stupid to just fling himself out the window, but...well.

Stomach churning dangerously, he stumbles around what he assumes is a fractured collarbone and a cracked skull and manages to get back to his apartment.

He shucks off the shooter, gathers all his work on the counter and then sweeps it off, frantic,

frazzled. It goes everywhere. The ash of his old uniform, the papers with scribbled ideas, the notebook. The new cartridge, the old one.

He's dizzy and can't think, and the pain is so fucking cloying that he's not sure what's real.

He has to get the blood off. *What the fuck were you thinking?*

Peter skids to his knees in front of the toilet and throws up, which is difficult because the pain at his collar leaves him without use of his hands.

There's puke on his pajama shirt now, along with the blood, and he gets into the tub, crouches in the corner, and turns the water on.

It wakes him. He's alive. She's dead. He turns the water to cold, heavy, and forces himself underneath the spray until he prunes, until he cannot breathe, until there is ice in his throat, until he is clean. (But he's not clean; the blood is still there, beneath the surface, on his suit, in his mind, everywhere.)

He's fully clothed, shivering, bleeding sluggishly through a head wound, ready to throw up again. The water pounds relentlessly.

He looks up into the showerhead, and, as the water gets into his eyes, wonders what will happen when he finally gets the new webs right.

It scares him.

And it doesn't. All at once.

Chapter End Notes

1. the science in this is only vaguely based in fact
2. i got asked for the playlist that I write to (thanks silvermittt!) so you can find it [here](#). It's a mess. You're welcome.

bleed

Chapter Summary

The spider bite, Ben, Mr. Stacy, Doc Ock, Harry, Gwen, Deadpool, SHIELD, the Avengers, Gwen. It was all perfect happenstance, and this new colder Peter, this new hurting Peter, is not discluded from the ways of fate.

Chapter Notes

Hey howdy hey it's me with the update that was supposed to go up three days ago.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 9 months, 3 weeks, 0 days

Peter gets the text after midnight, three hours into studying for his first final. It vibrates the haphazard papers stacked on his desk. Gingerly, he reaches to grab it, feeling his collar twinge. After he'd recovered from the fall enough to really be cognizant, he managed to drag himself to the nearest Urgent Care. It had been agony, and he'd been equal parts embarrassed and in pain when he finally collapsed in the waiting room, alone and wet and throbbing. The nurse had given him a sling and the doctor a prescription. The first few days the sling had been useful, but quick healing mixed with stubbornness lead Peter to discard it after a short while.

Now, Peter's phone blinks a new message from a number that a month ago had been disconnected. He rubs his eyes and tries to purge his mind of what he was just reading in his BioChem textbook to really focus. It's a Wednesday in early December, it's 12:41 AM and Deadpool just texted him.

He thumbs in the passcode and the text is a simple link. Peter pauses and a second text comes.

Deadpool

It's wednesday my dudes

He freezes, for a moment, and then clicks the link. It takes him to a dated YouTube vine compilation that's loud and raucous and there's a guy. Dressed up like Spider-Man. It's something Peter has seen before, but it gets him all the same; that familiar flippancy, the careless attitude, all wrapped into one.

Despite himself, Peter finds himself laughing a few seconds in, confused, exhausted, and a little bit euphoric. Equal parts concerned and amazed, he cuts the video short and sends his phone into a

call.

“Wade.” Peter says when he picks up. “Seriously?”

“Hi, Peter, how are you, Peter, I’m glad you’re alive, Peter.” Wade says, and his voice sounds amused. “Long time.”

“Long...are you serious? What the hell?” Peter asks. “I just--I mean--what the hell is wrong with you?” You didn’t answer, Peter wants to say. You just up and left.

Wade snorts. “That’s a good question. I think she’s going for some sort of parallelism? Between you and me?”

“She? Who is--”

“Or at least she was.” Wade laughs. “Anyway, just wanted to check in. Make sure you hadn’t done something phenomenally stupid.”

“What happened to me being too much of a dick for you to handle?” Peter insists.

There’s a long pause.

“Seriously, Spidey? You’re just gonna leave yourself open like that?”

Peter groans. “Do not make a dick joke.”

“I’ll show you a--”

“Do *not* make a dick joke.”

“--dick that’s--”

“*Do not make a dick joke .*”

“--too much to handle.”

“Jesus, Wade.” Peter hisses, irritated and laughing, feeling the same way he felt cornered on a stakeout and Wade couldn’t stop telling Yo Momma jokes. Like, he *physically* could not stop telling them. (It’s a long story that involved pissing off Dr. Strange and Spider-Man and being seventeen and stupid.)

Peter finishes. “Just--I thought you quit. I was under the impression you’d stopped caring.”

Wade hmms thoughtfully. “Yes, that is what you wanted me to do, wasn’t it.” He says in an odd tone.

The line goes dead.

Peter looks between his phone and his biochem notes, a the confused smile dropping from his face.

0 years, 10 months, 0 weeks, 0 days

In one of his earliest memories, Peter crawls into bed with his mother and father and presses cold toes into the bared skin of their calves and ankles. His mom is not the most poised in the morning, so she groans and shushes him, while his Dad blinks awake with a growing grin.

“Pete.” Dad whispers, eyes bleary and unfocused without his glasses. He scrambles for them from the nightstand, where they’re sitting on top of engineering paper filled with higher-order mathematics.

Dad fits his fingers into Peter’s ribs and digs them in. Peter *squeals* and jerks into a laugh, breathless. “Stop it!” and his dad does. Mom, on the other side, groans again, something along the lines of *this is what I get for having two four year olds*.

“C’mon!” His dad combs fingers over Peter to tangle in his mom’s shirt. “It’s Christmas.”

Peter giggles. “I think Santa came, Mommy.”

His mom rolls over and smiles at him. He remembers that. She smiled at him because she loved him.

“I think he did, Petey.” She scrubs fingers through his hair, and smacks at her husband. “We’ve waited this long can’t we--” her jaw cracks into a yawn “--wait a little longer?”

Peter squeals again, “No!”

And his dad chuckles and says, “You heard him.”

And that’s it.

They must have gotten out of the warm cocoon of body heat and family and blankets, they must have padded toward the tree and opened the gifts. They must have caught the train down to Queens to visit Aunt May and Uncle Ben. His parents existed outside of Peter’s memories, and sometimes that’s the part that baffles Peter the most.

Now, it’s a small affair. Peter spends the night at May’s, and in the morning he makes her hash browns and eggs in the same way Ben did when he was ten years old. They eat in relative silence, and it’s neither uncomfortable nor morose.

They do presents in the living room in their pajamas. They agreed previously on only two each; Peter is broke and May is not much better. Christmas in the Parker residence has never really been a big affair. Everyone is either dead or poor.

Peter gets a new sweater, a pair of gloves. May gets a pair of pearl earrings Peter managed to find at an *extreme* discount (though he lets May think he paid full price) and the newest John Grisham novel. May surprises him with textbook money for next semester as a third present, and Peter, surprised and oddly emotional, sweeps her into a hug.

“You cheated.” He tells her, arms tight around her bony shoulders.

Her hands are strong around him, and he feels something inside him, swelling, swollen, and he’s not sure what it is. It’s not hope, but a subset, like the way the sky brightens into indigo in the misty hour before dawn.

“I know.” May says, pinching his side.

They got to the cemetery in the early afternoon. Peter wears his new sweater and gloves and May the earrings. It’s not a white Christmas--the temperature is reaching forty and the sky is a murky gray that threatens no precipitation. It’s windy and Peter realizes as he steps onto the green that he needs a haircut. He was regular with them when he was still in the suit. It itched around the lower edges of his scalp.

He pauses, and May cups his elbow. “Come on, Pete.” She murmurs at him, her voice lost in the wind.

The ground is frozen, quiet. A few other families meander over the apex of the hill. The stones crop outward from the grass like ruins; the grounds need attended to and a few of the older headstones are half-covered in frost and grass. May scrapes the moss from the back of Ben’s granite and pauses to run a finger down the ‘j’ in Benjamin.

They don’t talk. There comes to a point where it’s not needed. Peter has been trying, really trying, to open up, to let May in, but now is not the time. Grief is a room with the door closed. Sometimes it’s okay to leave it like that.

The wind sends heat into Peter’s eyes and the fierce ache it leaves behind leaves his chest gaping open, his ribs cracked. His collarbone, mostly healed, throbs in time with the steady thrum beating of his heart, of the wind.

The thick grass shifts in the piercing breeze, and May takes a step back and hugs her arms around herself. Peter digs around in his pocket and offers her his second pair of gloves. She takes them.

Gwen’s grave is freshly cleaned, probably by Mrs. Stacy earlier this morning, and Peter leaves the rose in its regular place.

Ha. Its regular place.

Last Christmas he’d snuck out in the waning hours before May woke up to do a patrol. It had been starting to snow, a thin dusting that gave his webs difficult purchase on some buildings. Early in the quiet hush he’d tapped on Gwen’s window and shoved his cold hands up the sleeves of her oversized long-sleeved t-shirt. He hadn’t been able to stay, and instead parted with a quick kiss, a half-cocked grin, and a whispered, “Merry Christmas, Miss Stacy.”

Grinning into the quiet, he’d flung himself from her window, the only thing moving in the pre-slush dawn. The city that never sleeps was softer that morning; Rockefeller blinked weary twinkling eyes into the yawning city, Stark Tower was lit up in red and gold that threw plush shadows and pine-lit starlight into the streets below.

It was cold and his arms were tired, the wind pushing through the suit until gooseflesh curdled his skin, until it was almost uncomfortable to be out. But all he had felt was fondness. Fondness and pride, contentment; this was his city in a quiet pause, this was the place he’d bleed for and within in were the people he loved, shadowed and pink, red and green.

Now, standing next to May a year later, he brushes the dust off the memory and wishes for the wind to take it from him. It’s a burden, carrying on the memory of the ones he’s lost. Some days he’s all that’s left of Gwen in this world, a representation of all that’s left of himself, and the responsibility to uphold those memories is daunting.

The last graves they visit are the empty tombs of Peter’s mother and father.

Peter doesn't linger, doesn't remember much about who they were. He never knew them in his adult life. He knows he got his father's poor eyesight and his mother's inability to wake up before 7 AM.

He wonders who he'd be with them.

He knows who he is without them.

They go back home and watch old Christmas movies and talk about Ben, because he's a palatable hurt, moreso than Gwen. May makes the turkey and Peter mashes the potatoes and after dinner she falls asleep on the couch to National Lampoon's Family Vacation.

He's struck with the impenetrable feeling of *home* .

Peter watches the wind outside through the window next to the television and ponders the crossroad, that same strange not-hope feeling swelling warmly through his chest.

0 years, 10 months, 2 weeks, 3 days

"Stop calling me." Wade says shortly. He's difficult to reach when he doesn't want to be found.

"That is literally so hypocritical." Peter says instead of what he was going to open with. He shoots a web at the microwave from where he's perched.

"Oh yeah? I get it. I'm annoying. Ha ha." Wade replies dryly, just as Peter tugs the microwave door open. He gives a little *yes* of excitement and uses the other shooter to grasp the popcorn bag from inside and drag it to where he's lounged backwards in the cradle of about ten crisscrossed webs. It looks like this batch is going to hold. "Did you need something? I've got twenty five grand riding on the guy in my scope."

Peter's mouth goes dry. "That's not funny." He shifts the phone between his ear and his shoulder to open the bag of popcorn, which wafts buttery steam up toward the ceiling.

"You're damn right. I woulda taken him for fifteen." Wade replies with a chuckle.

"Wade." Peter admonishes.

"Yeah." Wade replies on the gust of a sigh.

Peter sits up and lets one leg dangle from the web cradle. He looks down at the floor below and, "I don't need saved." Peter replies abruptly.

There's a long silence. The webs creak.

"I don't need you to save me." Peter says again, voice building from its soft cadence, gaining confidence.

"That's very 90's teen movie of you." Wade's voice goes screwy. He's joking. "But son, this was your *dream* ."

Peter closes his eyes. "No dad." Peter replies. "It's *your* dream."

Wade laughs. Loud. “Fuck you, Parker.” and hangs up.

Peter shares a private smile with himself and plucks a web beneath him, feeling it oscillate, feeling his balance lurch, but instead of the ground shifting beneath his feet, it’s starting to steady.

0 years, 10 months 3 weeks 2 days

Peter sleeps.

He wakes up bleary, sure he had some sort of nightmare but unable to remember it. He stares up at the ceiling for a minute, two and tries to recall it. He can’t. His bones shape the mattress beneath him, and it’s warm, so warm.

His phone shows him a single message from a friend in his major, a short, “You literally missed all of your classes today.” And he tosses it aside, closes his eyes again.

0 years, 11 months, 1 week, 1 day

“Can I bum one?” Peter asks. He doesn’t smoke, doesn’t drink (anymore) but he’s got no better excuse.

The unfamiliar homeless man squints up at Peter, who had a haircut last week, who's wearing his glasses with the chip in the left rim, who has a t-shirt that has a pizza fit into Fibonacci’s series.

The man blows smoke into Peter’s face and says, “No.” Which. Okay. That’s valid.

Peter holds up his hands and adjusts his backpack. “Okay, fine. I’m looking for someone. A few someones.”

The homeless man cocks a brow and takes another pull. He leans back against the mouth of the dumpster, where it’s warmer. January has hit with vengeance and no one is spared.

He combs fingers through his ratty beard. “You that kid?” the man asks, not without disdain. “They all gone. S’only me.”

“What do you--”

He dumps off a few names, “Jack, Julio, Rebecca.” He goes on. A few names Pete recognizes as people Spider-Man used to work with and work for. He’d glean information out of them over a street-corner gyro, escort them to shelters during the waning hours of patrol, drop off May’s old blankets to the Vets over on 115th. There were a big group of them that laid low in the alleyways beside the docks, but they’re not here right now.

They were people that Spider-Man used to help.

“Where did they go?”

The man shrugs. Takes another puff. “Dunno, man. Streets change, y’know.”

“Do you have any idea where they went?”

The man shrugs again. “Some of ‘em prolly got clean.” He says. “Some of ‘em got popped.”

The breath whooshes out of Peter’s lungs. He backs away.

0 years, 11 months, 1 week, 2 days

“You’re a real piece of work, Parker.”

“Really?” Peter asks, and he’s grinning, yeah, that’s a smile. “I really think your flirtation skills leave something to be desired.”

He imagines Jameson pulling out his hair. “Parker, I swear to God.” Jameson says. “I’m not asking you again.”

“Yeah? Will it just be Betty calling for now on then or...’Cause I like her better.”

Jameson cusses. Loudly. And a lot. Peter has to hide his snort in the sleeve of his shirt. On the other end of the line, there’s another voice, something crashing, and then Jameson is back.

“Mr. Parker,” Jameson says in a brewing cold fury, his breathing short and his words controlled. “Would you... *please* ...consider...returning to the staff of the Daily Bugle....please.” He grunts.

Peter outright laughs in his face. And he doesn’t know why, but when he’s done and teary-eyed from laughing, he says. “Throw in a pay raise and I’ll see what I can do.”

And then he clicks off.

(And that’s that.)

Somewhere in the world, there’s a dance number about returning to the status quo.

0 years, 11 months, 1 week 3 days

The police beat scanner he lugs from his closet is covered in dust, but it works fine when it turns it on. He does his homework to the monotone drone of petty crime. By the end of his first assignment his skin feels prickly and he watches the radio blankly for a moment, two, before his listening clicks on again and he hears what they’re saying.

“Dispatch this is 3671.” Comes the static voice of a patrol.

“3671 responding.” The dispatcher replies in a dry voice. She sounds familiar, in that this is

probably the same woman he used to listen to when he was 16 and technically not allowed out after curfew.

“Looks like we’ve got a 10-79 on Eastchester and Williamsbridge.” A body in the Bronx.

“3671?” The dispatcher prompts.

“Ah, yeah.” 3671 falters. “Looks like she fell.”

“Copy that.” Dispatch says, and Peter flicks off the radio.

Peter feels his heart beat in his fingertips.

0 years, 11 months, 1 week, 4 days

May finds him on the couch with his hair clenched tightly between two fists. He’s tugging so hard his scalp burns.

“Pete?” She asks from the door, tossing her keys down and doing what sounds like readjustments to a bag full of groceries. “I didn’t know you were coming today.”

“I’m sorry.” He says, and his voice comes out low.

It’s deadly quiet for a few moments. May doesn’t move.

Peter bobs his leg. “I’m sorry.” he repeats again. For a moment he’s the same man he was 10 months ago, scraping his fork against a plate full of casserole, unable to rationalize Gwen being dead. For a moment he’s the same man he was five months ago, who told May he wasn’t his mother in any of the ways that mattered, whose touch poisoned, whose unpalatable loneliness was a viper.

He reverts, for a moment.

He doesn’t want to go back to being that man again, he doesn’t want to internalize everything and magnify it by default. But the problem is that Peter Parker is split in half, right down the middle, and he has no clue how to mend the tear.

“I was terrible to you.” He pauses, adds. “To everyone that tried to help. I’m sorry. I needed it. I need it.” He meets her eyes where she’s standing frozen in the foyer. “Please help me.” He says.

“Okay.” May says. “Okay.”

0 years, 11 months, 2 weeks, 0 days

May gives him a stack of papers, printed information of people she's researched, people she's been recommended by work colleagues.

"I don't want you to worry about the money, Peter." May tells him sternly. "Because I know you will."

"But May--"

"Worry about yourself for once, please." She snaps, and Peter quiets. He knows that he's got her on an edge of cut glass. It's a paper cut he keeps ripping deeper, because he's not sure he will ever forgive himself for the things he said. Her voice grows quieter. "You're laughing again."

"I--"

"You weren't. Before." She takes a ragged breath. "I thought. I thought that part of you was--" *gone forever.*

"I'm not as unselfish as you think, May." He flips the page because he can't meet her eyes anymore. May turns to the fridge and pulls out a glass pitcher of iced tea. "You put me on a pedestal."

"You're my nephew. I get to do that." May insists, pouring two glasses.

"No," he disagrees casually. The next page is the last one in the stack, detailing the office details of one Richmond Green, PhD. "No you don't."

"Right." May says tightly, and Peter's head jerks up. Her face has drained, her lips pressed tightly together, and Peter curses himself and his broken brain-to-mouth filter, because he knows what that sounded like, knows what May heard between the lines.

"May, that's not what I--"

She holds up a hand. "Just choose one, Peter. Please." Her exhaustion is evident in her voice.

After a moment of long silence, she leaves the kitchen, and Peter cards fingers through his hair.

0 years, 11 months, 2 weeks, 5 days

It's nothing like he thought it would be.

The first fifteen minutes is all paperwork, uncomfortable questions filled out with a Bic pen in an empty lobby playing soft rock. He feels weird trying to explain the "yes" he checked beside "history of anxiety" to a sheet of paper, but he does it, because he thinks somewhere deep down, beneath the reluctance and the fear, he needs this.

He turns in the papers to a friendly-looking receptionist and waits another five minutes until Dr. Kaplan is available, and he goes in slowly, clenching and unclenching his fists.

He doesn't lounge back on a reclined chair and immediately start crying, like he imagined, but instead places himself uncomfortably across from her at her desk at the edge of a comfortable

leather chair.

His hands are shaking.

“Hi, Peter.” Dr. Kaplan smiles at him, bright teeth and perfect glasses. She flips a manila folder shut and places it to the side. “How are you today?”

And it’s like that.

For the next half hour.

She doesn’t ask about Gwen right out, nor does she offer him her condolences or her advice. She asks him about his fall semester, his SI internship guaranteed by his scholarship.

She doesn’t take notes at all, she doesn’t nod or make soft noises of agreement. She doesn’t judge him. She just listens.

At the end she says, “I’m looking forward to be working with you.” Like it’s some sort of fucking business deal and not Peter’s squirming guts on the table.

He pauses at the door, feeling no better and no worse. “Are you,” He starts, turning. He feels static in his fingers, feet. Something buzzing. “Are you going to ask me about Gwen? Ever?”

Dr. Kaplan smiles thinly, “Peter.” She says carefully. “I would like to know *you*, first, before I know her.”

Peter folds his lips beneath his teeth and nods, taking a steadying breath through his nose. “Oh.”

“See you next week, Peter.” She smiles, and that’s that.

0 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 4 days, 0 hours

In the end, the choice is made for him.

Isn’t that how it always works?

The spider bite, Ben, Mr. Stacy, Doc Ock, Harry, Gwen, Deadpool, SHIELD, the Avengers, *Gwen*. It was all perfect happenstance, and this new colder Peter, this new hurting Peter, is not discluded from the ways of fate.

“Look,” Tate tells him. It’s late and cold and Peter feels like absolute shit, because he’s got three days until he goes back to that clock tower and relives the fall, and he *does not want to*. “Pete, you’re going to enjoy yourself. Come on.”

“I don’t want to have an Ides of March party at my apartment.”

“Nobody’s going to get stabbed!”

Peter rolls his eyes, “I don’t have friends to invite.”

“Yeah, but I do. You could finally meet Miles! Miles Morales?” Tate grins, like he knows

something Peter doesn't. "I think you two would get along."

"You said that about your cousin, too." Who hadn't been a bad guy, but had made Peter's Spidey senses go off the charts for some reason. He's not sure why, but he's been keeping an eye on him ever since. Usually when people spark his senses like that, they push him in front of trains or kill his girlfriend, so...

"Aw, Eddie's harmless." Tate pauses. "Mostly. Anyway, Miles is younger than us."

Peter snorts and pulls open the door to the CVS. They'd been studying together and now it's late, and Peter really wants some gummy worms. So he's getting some damn gummy worms.

"Malt balls, Peter?" Tate says from where he's dashed toward the candy aisle. "Milk duds?"

"Gummy worms." Peter says, grabbing a basket. He might as well get peanut butter while he's here. He's got 20% off on his rewards card that expires in the next few days, too.

"Gross, dude." Peter hears, and then he's smacked in the face with wet fear, anxiety. The hair at the back of his neck stands up. It's surprising enough that he drops the basket, which lands with a clatter in the newly quiet store.

He leaves the basket where he dropped it, gleaming red and out of place, and rounds the corner to where the radio waves in his brain originate. In the drug aisle there's a man casually browsing the diaper selection, his hands lingering on the CVS brand that's cheaper.

Peter takes a step toward him, browsing the cold medicine. He picks up a box of Nyquil and skims its drug facts. In the corner of his eye, the man's hand twitches toward his belt.

Peter puts down the medicine and faces him.

"You don't want to do this." Peter says with a confidence he hasn't had for almost a year.

"I--" The man hesitates. He's shaking. Twitchy. His eyes go back toward the off-brand diapers.

Peter takes a step closer and pauses immediately, senses ratcheting. It's like two notes playing in discord at the base of his brain stem, and the sound is so terrible it begins to hurt.

The man twitches his coat open and exposes the rust-steel gleam of the business end of a tactical knife.

Peter swallows and takes a step back, losing the distance he'd just gained. "You *really* don't want to do this. Whatever it is." He says, and his brain beats between his ears.

The CVS is calm, the quiet beat of a Taylor Swift song coming from somewhere overhead, and Peter's heart is beating so hard he feels it just beneath his skin.

"Please." Peter says. He thinks of Rahid, who has the night shift at the corner store just across town. He thinks of the shop owner that Ben had been buying from. "Don't."

The man shakes his head and releases his jacket, hands dropping, eyes back on the diapers, the wet wipes, the baby powder.

And then takes a shaky breath and pulls the knife from his belt.

When Peter was Spider-Man, adrenaline used to slow his fights down, used to frame the bad guys in high definition clarity. Now he has the sick taste of studying on his breath, the pound of a

fear induced headache, and instead of magnifying the situation his fight-or-flight stumps him.

He hesitates.

And then the man is whirling away from Peter toward the mouth of the aisle, while at the same time Tate is strolling toward the cash register.

The moment slows into blinding clarity.

Beat.

The man raises a fist, the empty one, covered in an old gray glove, aimed right at Tate to get him out of the way. Tate is turned away and can't see him. The store manager gives a clipped shout and

Beat.

Peter jerks into action, skidding out of the aisle. He's going fast, must faster than humanity would allow. Peter catches his fist inches from the back of Tate's neck, forcing it backward. Crushed beneath Peter's grip, his wrist jerks and opens.

Beat.

Tate whirls, "What the--"

Beat

"I told you this was a bad idea." Peter says, an impossible stressed smile bubbling to his face. The man is no match for Spidey's reflexes and strength, his wrist screaming from the pressure. Peter has ferality dancing behind his eyes and down his spine, his senses ratcheting, climbing, gowing.

Danger , they warn.

Beat.

The man looks at him wildly, scared and desperate and Peter *forgets that he's carrying a tactical knife* in his other hand until it's buried in his stomach.

Beat.

Beat. Beat.

Beat.

The world speeds up again

Peter releases his grip on the wrist in his hand and looks down at himself silently. The hilt is sticking from the top of his navel grotesquely; it bobs as he takes in a wet breath.

His senses have stopped screaming at him. His head feels heavy. His legs are filling with cement.

Bizarrely, he thinks, *shit , I have a quiz tomorrow.*

And then the pain hits, and the man scrambles back as Peter hits his knees, whimpering, suddenly sweaty hands scrabbling at the knife, and Tate's yelling something at him, the store door dings as the man makes his escape; something's burning between his eyes, something that feels like fear. There are arms on his shoulders, easing him down, don't take the knife out, Parker, you're going to be okay, just keep breathing Parker. He's whimpering, it hurts it hurts it *hurts* and wants to cover himself, wants to remove the hot bladed steel but someone is holding his arms back and away from the hot bloody core of pain, someone isn't letting him tear the pain away. He lets out a whimper.

It's okay, Peter, you did the right thing.

It's okay, Peter. You did the right thing.

The store is too bright and Peter is crying.

The last thing he sees before sirens and flashing lights is the front page of a gossip mag, lit red and blue by webbing, two polarized eyes staring glazed out of matte paper. He can't read the title of the paper, just holds onto mirrored eye pieces and web shooters until the world goes too dark to see at all.

Chapter End Notes

1. Dr. Kaplan is a real psychologist in the marvel universe. She's let with cap before.
2. The whole "no one's going to get stabbed" line was not intended to be a punny girl of foreshadowing but I kept it because...whoops
3. For a laugh Google that vine compilation

patch

Chapter Summary

“We talked about this.”

“You talked.” She hates him.

Hates the way his mind works, hates the poison that has crept in and ate away. He’s not selfish, no, but the complete opposite. His weight is the weight the world dumps on him, and he takes it like the stupidly self-sacrificing asshole he is. He doesn’t like it when things hurt, he doesn’t like it when things are more complicated than binary, he doesn’t like change, he doesn’t like thinking about the future because it scares the everloving shit out of him.

Gwen’s future is all she’s ever wanted.

Chapter Notes

i've taken many liberties with canon. whoops.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

0 years, 11 months, 3 weeks, 5 days

“You had a friend visit.” Aunt May says after the whole oh-my-god-Peter-what-were-you-thinking and the I’m-just-glad-you’re-alive. “While you were asleep.”

“A what?”

“You know, a friend?” May smirks. “I’m sure you’ve heard of them before.”

“Might have seen the term in a textbook once or twice.” Peter manages a weak smile that he doesn’t feel. His stomach feels like it’s been torn apart, and the morphine drip they gave him is too low of a dose so his body is metabolizing it too fast. Stupid spider bite. Fails him when he needs it most.

May offers him water and watches thoughtfully as he sips from it. “He told me to tell you that you’re an idiot.” She says.

Peter chokes. A little. It’s discreet enough that May doesn’t notice. Probably. “He?” He asks, because May knows who Tate is and May would have said if it was Tate. “He who?”

May takes the water back from him so Peter won’t tug his IV out again. The nurse already doesn’t like him enough.

May sets the cup down and purses her lips. “Now that I think about it, we never exchanged names.” Her eyebrows furrow. “MJ stopped by too. She says that since you’re in here you two might as well visit Harry.”

Peter flinches. “Can we go back to the first friend?”

“I don’t think-”

“What did he look like?” Peter asks. May sighs.

“I don’t know, Peter, he was wearing a baseball cap. He, uh.” May stops to say carefully, “seemed to have been in some sort of accident.”

“Right.” Peter says plainly. “I’m not up to visiting Harry.”

May doesn’t acknowledge the deflection. “Peter,” She warns. She’s already been through the tearful spiel of the I’m-not-losing-another-Parker-to-a-convenience-store-tragedy, so Peter has no idea what else she wants from him.

“I just want to rest.” Peter says, overwhelmed.

“Okay.” May says.

He actually does rest, and when he wakes up the shadows have changed across the ceiling, and the low blanket of fuzz behind his eyes tells him there’s someone sitting in May’s chair that’s not May.

“I have suppressed my spider senses enough that I ignored them when I really needed them.” Peter says dazedly to the ceiling. It’s ironically comical, in a delirious I-just-got-stabbed way. Peter is still feeling out of it.

“That is so fucked up.” Wade says at his right.

Peter rolls his neck to look at him. Wade is in plainclothes and wearing a Yankees hat.

“Yeah, “ Peter agrees slowly. “Yeah it kinda is.” Peter says. “Hey, you know any superhero shrinks?”

Wade smirks and waggles the skin where his eyebrows should be. “The voices have some recommendations.”

Peter snorts and turns away. His stomach throbs in beat with the fuzz at the back of his brain. He closes his eyes to acknowledge it. “What are you doing here, Wade?” Peter finally asks.

“Not sure.” He says, “I never *really* know what I’m doing.” It sounds like an apology for all the ways he fucked up trying to help in the past. The cornering at the coffee shop, the bleeding all over Peter’s floor, the stupid vine text message.

Peter takes it at it’s value. “Yeah, I know.” He opens his eyes again to watch the shadows on the ceiling. It’s just orange enough in the room that the sun is probably about to disappear behind the surrounding buildings. “I mean, you’re not wrong.” He sighs. “You know I have the webshooters back working?” The rest of the words bubble over without permission: “All I need is a suit.”

Wade is quiet. “All you need is a suit.” He quotes. “That seems a little premature.”

“It’s been a year.” Peter fires back.

“Peter, you just got stabbed by a middle-aged man in a CVS.”

That stops him short. “Right.”

There’s a short pause before Wade starts laughing. “This is *so* fucked up.” He says, and sobers. “Go back to sleep, Parker.”

Wade leaves it at that and Peter sleeps.

-10 years, 0 months, -6 days, -12 hours

Gwen *swears* she saw him, she does, okay, she remembers his untied shoes and the gaudy green poster that was too big for him. There were hundreds of people there that day, excited moms, nervous students. But Gwen remembers him, Peter Parker, eleven years old and awkward and trying to find his assigned spot for his science fair project in the auxiliary gym at Columbia University.

She remembers him because he was standing next to that Osborn kid, whose father was in the papers. Harry has his father’s curved chin and haughty shoulders, the same shoulders that plaster across science journals and newspapers alike.

It’s not a moment she remembers until *years* later, but it’s a moment all the same. It’s perhaps not defining or earth shattering.

But Gwen remembers.

-5 years, -5 months, -4 days, -1 hour

She meets Harry Osborn, and he’s the biggest pain in the ass she’s ever had the displeasure of entertaining. He’s snippy and snappy and too rich for his own good, and he likes to sit in the basement and bother the interns because his dad doesn’t give him enough allowance money to buy all the weed he wants.

It’s hot in the basement of Oscorp in the dead of summer, but if she wants a paid internship by the time she’s eighteen, she’ll damn well sit there for forty hours a week and help convert their old files to an online database.

Harry is sitting on her desk, eating an apple. Loudly. She’s annoyed, she wants to sneeze, and she’s been sitting on the floor for hours and her butt hurts.

“Do you have *any* life goals, Osborn?” She snaps, fed up. The apple he’s eating is out of her own lunch.

Harry laughs. “Life goals, Stacy?” He asks her. Crunch crunch. Another white dent in the red flesh of her apple. “The way I see it, you just live. It just comes. You take it.”

She laughs. “Guess it helps that you have a multimillion dollar corporation to inherit, huh?”

Harry’s eyes darken a fraction. “You got life goals, Stacy?”

She shrugs. Cambridge in the blood orange of a sunset. Early mornings in a Costa Rican jungle, blinking blearily from behind mosquito nets. Children with proper medical care. A white coat and a walk-up in Brooklyn and someplace and someone to call home. “I guess.” She says.

-5 years, -3 months, 0 days, -14 hours

“Goddammit.” Her dad is saying into the phone. He’s in the hallway, like that gives him any sort of privacy at all. “Goddammit.” He repeats.

“Honey, eat your grapefruit.” Her mother chides. Gwen’s eyes slide from her father’s shadow to her mother. From behind this morning’s edition of The New York Times, her mom is only manicured nails and perfectly flat blonde hair.

“I just--” Gwen tries.

“Gwen.” Her mom says, lowering the paper. The black and white picture on the front is almost beautiful; a guy outlined in gray smoke and black fire, his arm a taught line of muscle, his face covered, his eyes reflective. There’s a kid in on arm, face curved against his spandex throat. The guy supports him with one arm, and uses the other to attach to some sort of string to swing away from the fire.

From the hallway, Gwen hears, “Friendly? Are you kidding me? Listen, Richard, I will not have another freak in a costume ruin my--”

“*Gwen*.” Her mom puts the paper down, uses the picture as a good place to put her coffee mug. “It’s police business.”

“I dunno Mom, it looks a lot like every New Yorker’s business to me.” She says. She wonders what the picture looks like in color. People screaming. Red orange fire. Is his suit gray? Is it yellow? Black? Red? She wants to know.

“Your father is very stressed about this, so I would *appreciate* it if you kept opinions like those to a minimum, young lady.” Her mom purses her lips. “Now how are your history grades?”

-3 years, -8 months, -4 days, -6 hours

The way I see it, it just comes. You take it.

She’s crying, her mom is combing fingers through her hair, “I know, baby, I know.” She says. “I know it hurts right now, I know your pride is stung. But you have such a bright future. Gwen, you’re the smartest person I’ve ever known, and I’m *honored* to be your mother. You know that

right?”

From the doorway, her father says, “It’s just a bump.” He’s holding the rejection letter. “You have your whole life ahead of you. In twenty-five years it won’t matter. Gwen, it won’t matter. We love you, we believe in you. You’re heading off to do amazing things, either way Gwen. Either way.”

It just comes. You take it.

-2 years, -10 months, -8 days, -9 hours

“You’ve got to understand, Stacy, this kid, he’s like, what six feet tall, gangly as hell. Biggest fucking nerd I’ve ever fucking met. Standing in the middle of this grocery store holding two pineapples between the bulkiest fucking security ever, and I swear to god, he hands one pineapple to each one of them and fucking--”

“Osborn, you’re supposed to be helping.” Gwen has upgraded. She’s a senior in high school, off to college soon. She’s got lab goggles and a pipette.

Harry is still sitting at her desk, eating her food. He bothers her more than the rest of the interns.

“I mean, yeah, but I’m not a meganerd like you or..” He cuts off.

Gwen arches a perfect brow beneath fogged lab goggles.

“Shit.” Harry says. “Shit I am the best fucking friend ever.”

Gwen returns to her work.

“Peter Parker you better be fucking grateful for this.” Harry says, and stalks out.

-2 years, -8 months, 0 weeks, -5 days, -4 hours, -28 minutes, -18 seconds

She meets Peter Parker on the hottest day of the summer. He makes a terrible first impression, supporting a limp and a split lip, gets tongue tied and calls her a pretty boy instead of a nice girl. Gwen has no idea why he’s been lifelong friends with Harry, because this Peter kid is *sweet*, and attractive, and above all very, very kind.

He’s awkward though, but he kisses her on the cheek at the end of the night, and she can’t stop grinning, can’t stop laughing, like something is lit up inside her, sparkling Christmas lights, a new and blazing sun.

-2 years, -0 months, -4 days

It's out of the blue, one day. He comes to her window, sweaty, his clothes haphazard. "How did you--" She peers past him. "Peter, we're eighteen stories up."

"I--" Peter glances down like this is the first time he's noticed. "I just--"

He takes a steadying breath.

"I just love you, is all." He says. His eyes are so eager, so earnest. And Gwen...Gwen has had relationships before, the fling with another Oscorp intern that lasted two months, the pining after the guy in her physics class senior year.

But this.

This she feels in her fingertips.

"Do you want to come inside?" Gwen asks, and something ticks in Peter's face, his eyes are watery from the cold. He looks scared, and it's not from the height.

"I just wanted you to know." Peter says his voice choking.

"Peter?" Gwen asks, reaching a hand to rest on his forearm. He's beautiful, like this. Vulnerable. Strong.

"Yeah?" Peter asks.

"I love you too." She says, and she means it. She means it with her fingertips, with her nose, with her feet, with her chest, with her heart. She doesn't know what this syrup sticky feeling inside her chest is, but when she looks at Peter all she can think about is the future.

Peter meets her eyes again.

A smile grows on his face.

-1 year, 11 months, -15 days

"Stop it. Stop it right now." The man on her balcony is bleeding and hovering in the corner, but the worst part of it all is the *panic* in his voice. She's never heard it this bad. It's surprising that she's learning more about him when he's in the mask than when he's out of it. "Stay away from me."

Gwen clears her throat. "You came to me." She can't keep the humor out of the statement, though the situation doesn't warrant it. She's just afraid, that's all.

"I know, I know, I know I--" Spider-Man gasps. He's in pain. "You still can walk away from this, Gwen. I don't--I can't--" His voice sprays wet.

She takes a step closer. "You won't scare me away." She's known for a while, now. Peter is not a liar but he's been lying. "Also. Not an idiot."

“I know. I know that.” Spider-Man shrinks back into the corner. He’s inhuman in the papers, stronger, bigger than Gwen could even guess. Spider-Man is a quip wrapped web and he’s *cool*, amazing, and Gwen has her heart caught in her throat because he doesn’t look like a giant right now.

He looks like a man.

Gwen opens her palms toward him and pauses. “I don’t know what you want.” Frustration bleeds into her voice, a desperate sort of lump coloring her words.

“I want you to walk away.” Spider-Man says, his voice low. He’s leaving a trail of blood. “Right now, Gwen. This is over.”

It’s a sudden pain, but not unexpected.

Gwen wants to be angry. She wants to march over to him and shout, to tell him to fuck himself, but she knows him. *She knows him*, perhaps better than anyone ever has.

“You came to me.” She says instead, quiet. And Spider-Man whimpers.

Spider-Man says. “You can stop right here. We can pretend this never happened, that we never met. Stay *away* from me.”

Gwen straightens her shoulders, combs her hair from where its going wild with wind. She states. “I am perfectly capable of making my own choices.” Another step. Spider-Man has nowhere else to go but down, and Gwen can tell he’s got a web shooter busted.

“No you’re--” Spider-Man says and then stops when Gwen’s breath catches in her throat. There’s that anger-pain again; this is the worst thing she’s ever done.

“Don’t presume to know what’s best for me.” Gwen states coldly. “My mother does that just fine.”

“I *do* know what’s best for you.” Spider-Man says, a steel in his voice that hadn’t been there before.

“So why do you try in the first place?” She’s yelling now, a little. He’s a skittish animal but he’s hurting her, he’s doing it again, and she won’t just stand around and let him. That’s not who she is. “Why did you even come here?”

He keeps her gaze, but his silence is telling.

She takes another step forward and points at him. “This is unsustainable, you know.” Unhealthy. Unbalanced. Unnerving. A whole bunch of “un” words.

Again, Spider-Man doesn’t drop his gaze. His fingers tighten around the wounds on his torso.

Gwen is close enough to hear his breathing over the wind, and she drops to her knees. She kneels next to him, fits two fingers beneath his mask. Feels his pulse there. Beating. Alive.

“Let me choose.” She whispers, his skin warm and soft.

“This scares the hell out of me.” He says, the first time that he has *ever* in their ten months of dating said something so vulnerable, the first time he’s ever let her in in this way. Gwen realizes this *thing* is so much bigger than she had ever thought it would be.

She watches herself in his reflective lenses for a really long time, feeling his pulse beneath her

fingertips. His hand comes up to circle her wrist, but he doesn't tug her away. His grip just tightens. Despite his strength, he doesn't hurt her.

"This is a mistake."

Gwen shrugs. She smiles timidly at him. His chest expands in an inhale. The wind dies, picks up, dies again.

"You won't lose me." Gwen says.

"I might."

She smiles at him. "Then that's my choice." And then it's a bandaid, easier quick than slow.

Peter Parker has a black eye.

"Come on, Pete." Gwen says. "Let me help you."

He's running hot, really hot, so she leads him into the bathroom. It's a slow trek, Peter is limping and still panicking, bleeding.

She eases him into the tight space between the toilet and the shower. He rests a flaming cheek against the porcelain of the bath and Gwen strips his gloves, his shooters. She takes his hands in hers, appreciates his callouses and bruises in a new light. Her hands skate down his muscles; he's always been lean and athletic, and she knows why now, has seen his arms bulge with the force of the earth behind them.

His uniform peels off slow, seeped with blood, and beneath it he's a mottled purple and red, oozing blood from four deep and large scratch marks.

"You're not freaking out." Peter manages as she stands to retrieve the hydrogen peroxide.

Gwen swallows. "You're freaking out enough for the both of us."

Peter huffs. "I suppose that's fair."

She gets his wounds checked and disinfected, patches him with gauze and then backs away, waits for his breathing to ease. She keeps one hand planted near his thigh and tells him to breath with her, tells him to feel how cold the porcelain is, to plant himself firmly against the wall and between the toilet and the shower stall and just *breathe* . It takes much longer than she expects, but he reaches for her hand.

"I've never told anyone this before." Peter says.

She lifts his hand to her mouth, kisses each bruised knuckle. "Spider-Man must be pretty lonely." She replies. Peter flinches, and Gwen isn't sure what exactly she said wrong, but he doesn't pull away.

"They're...we're not two different people." Peter says, a hitch leftover in his voice from the panic attack.

She meets his eye. "I know." She says importantly. "I know."

-1 year, -10 months, -18 days

Gwen wakes up when Peter flops himself all over her.

“Mrpshia” She admonishes into her pillow.

“Shh, it’s naptime.” Peter says, his nose right behind her ear.

“It fucking *was* .” She manages, squirming. “You’re heavy, get off.”

“Nap time.” he repeats. “Bad day.”

“Oh yeah?” Gwen asks, and lands an elbow into his ribs. He jerks off her, and she goes after him. They wrestle for a few moments until Gwen ends up with Peter pinned to the mattress, his wrists in her hands.

He pauses. “I could crush you.”

“Oh?”

“Like a little bug. Squish.”

She smirks. He’s got blood purple bags under his eyes, and his face is pale. “I dare you.”

He doesn’t even move. “But nap time?”

“Weakling.” She teases.

“Get off.” He doesn’t move again. He could knock her into next week if he wanted to. “Nap time.”

“Okay.” Gwen says. She leans down, kisses him on the nose. “Loser.”

-1year, -5 months, -29 days

He opens the door to his aunt’s house and steps out, a clear message she’s not allowed inside.

“Gwen,” Peter says, and seeing him does the weirdest thing to her guts, make them curl. She wants to throw up, to back away, to do *anything*, be *anything* but the person standing on May Parker’s front porch. “We talked about this.”

“You talked.” She hates him.

Hates the way his mind works, hates the poison that has crept in and ate away. He’s not selfish, no, but the complete opposite. His weight is the weight the world dumps on him, and he takes it like the stupidly self-sacrificing asshole he is. He doesn’t like it when things hurt, he doesn’t like it when things are more complicated than binary, he doesn’t like change, he doesn’t like thinking about the future because it scares the everloving *shit* out of him.

Gwen’s future is all she’s ever wanted.

“You don’t get to do this, Peter.” She tells him. It’s raining and it hurts, it hurts so fucking bad she’s not sure it’s going to stop.

Peter tugs at his hair. It’s a tell; this is getting to him. “Your dad--”

“I told you this,” She snaps, “I *told* you to let me make my own decisions. If anything this is on me.” Her voice cracks.

“But I--”

“I know.” And then, amazingly, it’s happening. The funeral, learning about it. She hadn’t cried. She couldn’t, the shock was too numb, too bright. But now her chest is hot and her eyes are wet and, “It feels like...it feels like there’s a part that’s broken in me that I can never get back.” She manages, wiping impatiently at her eyes.

Angrily, so angrily, she jabs a finger into his chest. “You don’t get to do this to me.”

His eyes drop.

It’s raining. Gwen has a hole in her life and she will never be the same person she was before.

“You of all people should understand.” Gwen threatens, and Peter squeezes his eyes shut.

“Okay.” He says, still unable to meet her eyes.

They stand on the porch in silence for a while, listening to the rain. Eventually Peter makes his decision, moves forward to hold her close to him, says nothing as she shakes apart in his arms.

-1 year, 0 months, -30 days

Spring semester starts cold, and Gwen is wearing a decidedly unattractive coat of her mother’s that the man takes at coat check. Peter shakes snowflakes out of his hair and sends her a *look*, and she just smirks.

“Stop looking like Sewage Man took over the city again.” She straightens out his coat. “Pouting is not a look you wear well.”

Peter frowns. He scratches the back of his neck, fixes his tie. “You know I’m no good at these things.” He gestures toward the function inside, rich people and richer desserts circling. It’s for a good cause, and Gwen personally thinks he should be a little more grateful. The Maria Stark foundation is paying for his education. “I always say something wrong.”

Which is a good point when forty-five minutes later and cornered by Tony Stark himself, he makes some sort of weird gagging noise after the question, “So, Ms. Stacy, do you know Spider-Man too?” Peter then implies that they’re all in some sort of mutually agreeable polyamorous relationship before flushing and retreating toward the desert table under the guise of loving the pudding.

Gwen watches him walk away, a fond smile on her face.

Mr. Stark says, “He always like that?”

Gwen rolls her eyes. “You’d be surprised.”

By the time Peter returns, Gwen has Tony in a heated debate about GMOs, because she’s networking, goddammit, and knowing both Norman Osborn and Tony Stark has *got* to come in handy one day.

0 years, -4 months, -12 days

She cries on the day she gets the internship. She’ll start this summer at a firm in Southern California, and she’s *excited*. This is her life. She’s living it, jumping in with both feet. Here it comes.

She visits her dad at Calvary, and then her mom.

Peter pouts when he learns about it--again with the doesn’t like change and doesn’t like losing people--but Gwen is confident he’ll get over it.

It’s her life, after all.

0 years, -2 months, 0 days

“Are you doing okay?” Gwen asks Harry when she sees him next. Peter is here somewhere, mingling with an old neighbor or something. Gwen has not met her yet.

“Huh?” Harry says from the mouth of his tumbler full of whiskey. His eyes are sunken in. “What did you say, Stacy?”

“Osborn.” She says flatly. “You look like death.”

Harry smiles weakly. “Yeah. I’ve been getting that lately.”

She quirks an eyebrow. “Well?”

“Oh uh.” He sets the whiskey down. He looks at her. Smiles. “Would you marry Parker, if he asked?”

There’s something off about the question, that makes Gwen go quiet, introspective. “Harry, we’ve only been together for two years.”

He shrugs.Laughs. “I’d marry that kid. Have you *seen* his ass?”

She laughs, too, but the worry sits blank at the stem of her brain. “Yes, I have seen my boyfriend’s

ass.”

Harry fakes a gagging noise. “You just made that comment less innocuous and I don’t like it. My childhood best friend. And you! Stacy!”

“Harry!” A voice cuts in. It belongs to a radiant ginger that’s hanging off Peter’s shoulder, her smile straight, perfect, her nails resting easily against Peter’s neck.

Peter smiles at Gwen from under this new girl, and Gwen can’t help the feeling that she’s in over her head.

She wonders what her dad would say about all of this as the two come to join them. The girl--Mary Jane, she later learns-- gets deposited in Harry’s arms and Peter smells like her perfume when he slides his nose into Gwen’s collar, his arms loose around her waist.

“She’s just a friend.” Peter assures her in the quiet of his apartment later that night.

Gwen shrugs at him. “I’m a *saint*, Peter.”

He grins, relieved. “For dealing with all this crap?” He gestures to himself. “Heck yeah you are.”

0 years, -1 month, -18 days

She tucks her eyes into his neck, pretending they’re not wet.

“Did I do the right thing?” Peter asks her. His fingers skim up her spine. Up. Down. Light. The pads of his fingertips feel so familiar it makes the lump in her throat grow and grow.

She doesn’t respond to his question, because she knows whatever she says won’t change what he thinks.

The silence lasts for a long time.

0 years, 0 months, -15 days

It’s cold, February cold, but she’s got a window open anyway. The heat is broken and overworking. She’d probably cook to death in her sleep if she didn’t have the window open.

The city is loud, as it always is, but it’s a familiar hum. She burrows into her blankets, asleep.

She wakes when Peter gets home, his breathing quickened, his suit hitting the ground with quiet little *thwap* s.

He pushes his cold fingers underneath her long sleeves and she grins into the pillow. “Hate you”

She mangles.

Peter is already halfway asleep. “You too.” He agrees.

0 years, 0 months, 0 days

You don’t learn anything in death. That’s not how it works. Death is not a lesson to be learned, which Gwen has always privately thought has been Peter’s biggest problem. Death is not a corporeal form of a villain to be defeated, and that emptiness it leaves behind cannot be fought with webs or a quip.

It doesn’t show you who you are as a person or in the context of other people. Death isn’t a part of life that makes you *better*. It doesn’t make you worse, either. Just different. A little more brittle, perhaps, a little angrier, a little more resigned.

She still feels every minute of her father’s loss, even here, even now, standing on a New York street beneath the clocktower with the world around her in chaos. Cops screech sirens all around her, and she thinks *My dad could have helped here* and she thinks *Peter can’t do this alone*.

Gwen told him all those months ago that Spider-Man knows loss and loneliness as intimately as anything else; he can’t do it alone. He shouldn’t have to. She’s been trying to tell him that since she found out about him, about who he was, about how his organs twisted together, about how his brain whispered nasty things into his reality.

She’s beginning to feel Harry’s loss now, too. He’ll settle into her marrow as the apple-stealing annoyance in the dusty Oscorp basement, not as the green thing he is now.

She’s not ready for Harry to die, or Peter, or her mom, or Aunt May or anyone, really. But, of course, death is not a lesson to be learned. It’s not something that can really be prepared for. It’s not a test.

The death she is least prepared for is her own.

She sees the orange-black speckled night sky, hollowed and circular through the top of the tower. She sees the clogs of the clock. Him, the curve of an arm beneath the suit. She has never loved anything more than she loves him.

The last thing she sees are the small bones in her palm grasping upward, extending, while the entirety of the night reaches back.

Chapter End Notes

happy memorial day to all my us peeps

wound

Chapter Summary

1 Year, 0 Months, 0 Weeks, 0 Days, 0 Minutes, 0 Seconds

Chapter Notes

canon has definitely been left behind

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1 Year, 0 Months, 0 Weeks, 0 Days, 15 Hours, 0 Minutes, 0 Seconds

Peter wakes up on his last day in the hospital and he *knows* . It's a clarity that he has searched for in long runs, web experiments, and late night musings. He knows that this thing he's been trying so hard to breathe around and cut out and forget has settled in, knows that fighting against this ache just makes the bruises larger, as it will never go away. It may one day fade, like it did with Ben, but it won't go away like he's been wanting it to. She's not coming back.

May checks him out of the hospital and helps him to her car. He's still got a limp and walking is unpleasant. It's late February and still cold, though a deceptively bright sun shines yellow overhead.

May helps him to the passenger seat and deposits him there with an odd look on her face. She leans over and kisses him on the forehead and messes up his hair, a relic of a routine they'd had when Peter had thought his parents were still coming back. It's almost like she knows, too, which is impossible. May hasn't been counting the days and months and minutes like Peter has. She might know the date but she doesn't *know* . Or maybe she does. Maybe that's why she fought so hard against Peter, why she'd let Peter have his gloves up for so long.

Morning traffic is normal; it's a Tuesday and they're heading westbound toward Manhattan from New York Presbyterian. May turns up NPR and the ride continues in silence as the newscaster talks about the Dow.

1 year, 0 months, 0 days, 15 hours, 30 minutes 0 seconds

Peter cups his hand around the bandaging at his stomach and wonders what would happen if he'd been smart enough to pay attention to what his brain was telling him. He would have stopped the knife and probably broken the guy's wrist. No money would have been stolen and the police would

have arrested the man immediately.

The guy was looking at diapers.

Which shouldn't be a point of empathy--he tried to commit a crime and then *stabbed* Peter--but that's the part that Peter keeps returning to. He can't stop thinking about the moment in the aisleway where the man had relaxed his fingertips, slumped his shoulders. The hesitant second where he thought about giving in and not doing it.

Something wet and fresh opens up inside Peter, a guilt he'd first tasted right after Ben's death. It's been diluted, recently; the classic Spidey guilt had no place within a man who was fundamentally distancing himself from Spidey. He'd felt less guilty about Gwen than just all around devastated. This now is a familiar sting, though, and almost a comfort at this point. He's not sure when he processed this feeling, but he did, somewhere in between mourning Ben and Peter's first Skrull invasion. And now when the guilt crops up it sparks inside him a kind of motivation.

Maybe it's just as fucked up as Wade was saying at his bedside (Peter is still not entirely sure that wasn't a fever dream). Maybe this is not in any way handling his issues or moving on.

Or maybe Peter's "great power" wasn't the spider bite at all.

Maybe it's this wet cavern inside his heart, his open, strained heartstrings. Maybe it's the unfathomable loss he faces in the morning when he wakes up. Maybe his power is the same thing that defines his weakness: his empathy and his guilt.

It's what makes him human just as much as what made him someone he once considered to be a hero. He'd get up and punch back even with a bloody nose and bullet graze. He'd work cases with Clint and swing by the homeless vets on 183rd and tell Tony whenever his newest invention needed more betaing. He'd make lunch for May and single-handedly help that kid next to him through an entire semester of Statistics.

Did he have responsibility to use his power? Or did he have merely the responsibility to control it, to mold it into something that made a difference? He's still not sure. He really isn't.

Gwen died, in the most literal sense, at Peter's hand. He put Gwen in a situation and did not get her out of it, and for that he'll always take responsibility. But Peter also hadn't been able to save the man in the CVS, or many before him. What makes her different is that he *felt* his failure, felt it in every cell and around every corner and under every pitying gaze. He felt it and could not admit that he is not an anomaly, that people lose each other every day, that people die before they live, that *Peter*, not some stranger, was the center of one of Spider-Man's mistakes.

But he *knows* now.

He knows with a strange clarity that Gwen is dead.

And it's a goddamn tragedy that she's been gone from this world a whole year. The fresh memory of her faded so long ago he's forgotten even her laugh. He only knows her now in what he recalls of her.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 19 hours, 0 minutes, 0 seconds

When he gets home, May goes into work (it takes him at least half an hour to convince her that he can be left alone) and he naps for an hour. His dreams are fever hazy and diluted by the pain, enough so that he stumbles into the kitchen and swallows his pain medication dry two hours earlier than recommended.

Peter takes a shower, trailing his fingers lightly over the ten stitches that cut through his lower abdomen. The skin around it has puckered and purpled; some of the bruising forms the oblong shape of the hilt of the knife, and it's detailed enough to make Peter feel a little woozy just thinking about it.

Peter gets out of the shower and clutches the sink, the air steam-hazy and thick with water. It takes him a minute for his mind to stop spinning, and then he pulls on boxers and rebandages the stitches. He finds jeans on the ground and tugs them on, though they're tight enough to leave him out of breath; the skin on his stomach pulls thin, enough so that Peter has to take a break for fear of tearing his stitches.

He calls Tate as he searches for a shirt; he doesn't think a flippant tee is appropriate for today's activities, so he settles for one of Ben's old flannels. It's easy to put on and the buttons are big enough that his weary hands don't have trouble fumbling with them. Tate is still a mess about what happened in the store, despite being religiously at Peter's bedside and also having already bought him six (yes, six) packages of gummy worms, both sour and regular. Peter understands why; Tate had been in a robbery that had degenerated into a graphic stabbing. Most 21 year olds have never seen that much real blood at once. In any regard, Peter tells him to come over this weekend because May is cooking, and by the end of the phone call Tate seems to have calmed down, at least for today. It probably helped that he's late for Physical Chemistry, which is widely regarded as the hardest science class EState offers.

Then Peter is left again in the quiet of the place that housed his childhood. He pulls socks on, and then shoes. The pain medication is starting to kick in and his eyes feel bleary.

He eats cold soup from the refrigerator and puts the tupperware in the dishwasher, and then MJ is at the door.

Peter opens up and says, "Give me a sec." before turning away.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea." MJ tells him, and Peter can feel her eyes.

He locates his wallet and keys and turns back to her.

"You look like shit." She tells him frankly.

"Wow MJ, next time let's see how you feel after getting stabbed." Peter says unkindly.

Her face sours in a way that shows what she'll look like in twenty or so years, wrinkles forming on her forehead and at the crease of her lips. "That's my point, Peter. Are you up for this?"

"Are you?" He brushes past her and waits on the porch. She pauses for a moment and steps out, pulling the door closed. He locks up quickly and walks to the curb slowly, MJ side-eying him the whole way.

“What if we can’t...” MJ starts five minutes later when they’re waiting at the first light out of their neighborhood. “What if he’s not...” She tries again but still can’t finish.

Peter shrugs bitterly; the gap between him and MJ will never get smaller, he’s discovering. What was there through their whole relationship--the void between them that drove her to LA and him toward Gwen--hasn’t shrunk, even after being one year gone from Spider-Man. He lifts a hand (painfully) and drops it on her neck as she accelerates through the green light. There’s so much he wants to say, things that might make things better, most that would make things worse. Instead he just squeezes, lightly, and withdraws. “Then he’s not.” Peter says, aware that it’s a nonanswer. “And we don’t.”

When they get there, MJ parks in almost the same spot that May’s car had been in just hours before. He hopes none of his own nurses see him, because he’s crotchety when in pain, and hadn’t made a single friend despite two days in their care. Fortunately, they’re headed toward the Neuro ICU which is in a different wing than the Emergency admittances.

In the long walk to get there, Peter scoops up MJ’s hand. Her breath hitches next to him, but he does her the courtesy of not looking. He long ago made peace with the fact that his girlfriend may have been cheating on him with his best friend; they made a better couple anyway, and when he first met Gwen he cared for little else, relationship-wise. On the scale of Shitty Things That Have Happened to Peter Parker, MJ and Harry’s relationship was so low that Peter has never thought it was anything other than a *good* thing.

MJ’s hand tightens in his as they approach, and he’s struck with a wave of familiarity that he tugs her to a stop.

Peter forces MJ to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry that things between us didn’t work out, but I’m not sorry that you were so happy with Harry.”

“Peter--”

“I’m sorry that I was...I’m sorry that we ended the way we did, but I’m just really glad that he was, you know, with you. That you two got a chance. Like me and --” He glances up instead of finishing.

MJ looks at him for a long moment, and then her eyes fill with tears. “Thank you, Peter.” She says, sounding surprised.

He knows a thing or two about the agony and inherent oxymoron of the idea of a quick death--it’s never quick. Especially if it’s a loved one. It’s like old-coffee percolating and burning in an untended machine; it sits in a way where you can do nothing but notice it. What MJ is missing with Harry is not unlike what Peter is missing with Gwen. He’s not sure what’s worse. Losing someone permanently or always trying to grasp them again, like if the clocktower had been endless and Gwen had reached for him into eternity.

MJ reels him into a hug and Peter realizes that he’d never stopped reaching back.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 20 hours, 13 minutes, 0 seconds

The nurse they’d called yesterday smiles as she asks them to sign in. She hands them scrubs,

gloves, hair protection, goggles, and masks. They've reached the stage where full-suits aren't required, as they determined that being the Green Goblin is not contagious, just hereditary.

Before MJ puts her mask on and they enter the decontamination chamber, she begins to look uncertain again. "He killed people. Even if he wasn't himself. Harry still killed people."

The decontamination door closes behind them, and Peter is saved from responding by the blowers.

Too bad; MJ wants to pursue this. "Peter?" She asks when the fans die but before the airlock unseals. Her voice is muffled by the gaudy plastic of her mask.

"I know." He's looking down at his gloved hands. They're trembling, so he tucks them around his torso, protecting his wound. It feels like the blowers stole his breath from him, and suddenly he's starting to freak out.

They each share some responsibility, Spider-Man and Green Goblin. Sure, Wade might be right: there is a difference between killing someone and failing to save them. But Green Goblin still killed her, and Spider-Man still failed to save her.

And now they're in the same room.

"You first." Peter offers in a small voice, and MJ's face drains. Her hair stands ruby against her cheeks.

But she walks into the room as the lock unseals anyway, head high. She's got a confidence in her that Peter still loves unconditionally.

The room is sparse, just a bed and a half dozen monitors, so MJ approaches the bed to stand beside it as Peter steps in behind her.

Harry looks small. Sunken in. His hair is more sparse and dull, his eyes closed against a face that looks little more than the skeleton beneath it. He's up to his shoulders in blankets.

"Hey, Harry." MJ says. The body in the bed doesn't even twitch.

Peter places a hand on MJ's arm. "I'll give you a moment."

He turns away to face the entrance, blinking hard against the bright lights. He stares at the colors that paint the backs of his eyelids.

The Goblin had known from the moment he laid eyes on Gwen who was beneath Spider-Man's mask. Peter's identity was his greatest treasure, and because it had been so exposed that night, Gwen had died.

He remembers that night in spots. He doesn't remember letting go of Gwen's cooling body, but he'd set her down on the dusty concrete floor as blood pooled beneath her. He doesn't remember climbing out of the clocktower but he must have; how else did he get back to Green Goblin, who was down for the count a few yards away from the clock, his board busted, something oozing from his arm?

Peter *does* remember taking him by the lapels. Peter remembers Harry's eyes woozily opening, a sick green hand coming to his wrist and clutching it tightly as Peter lifted him off the ground.

"...ete...?" Harry had groaned softly, still out of it, eyes blinking heavily. Peter had taken off his mask when he was begging for Gwen to be alive, and now he was standing on the street exposed

and raw.

He doesn't remember how but his hand ended up around Harry's throat.

Spider-Man was going to kill him.

He was going to end Harry's world like the Goblin had ended his own. Harry's eyes bugged out. Peter grit his teeth and squeezed.

Harry's mouth opened, desperate little whimpers coming out of it. That sick green hand was still around his wrist, scrabbling at it and trying to tug it away. Harry let out a desperate, keening sound, and then, "...Pete....er."

And Peter had dropped him. Immediately. This was his best friend he had by the throat and Gwen was lying fifty feet away, not even five minutes dead. Harry hit the ground hard and suddenly the desperate, keening noise was coming from Peter's throat as he tore hands through his hair and stepped backwards. He hit the wall of the tower and leaned heavily on it, his sticking abilities the only reason he was still vertical.

And then blue and red lights. Sirens.

Spider-Man ran.

Twelve hours later May had told him Gwen was dead.

And now he's back here, the world having come full circle, and there are still parts of him that want to strangle Harry. It won't bring Gwen back. It won't even bring the Harry that he once knew back.

"Peter!" MJ interrupts his musings and Peter turns, only to find two sets of eyes watching him.

"S wonderin' when I'd see your pretty face." Harry slurs, a dopey smile fixing his face. He's struggling to get an arm out from beneath the blankets. Peter registers that Harry is still outlined in that sick, bright green color. It's even in his face, now that Peter is really looking.

Peter just gapes.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 21 hours, 2 minutes, 0 seconds

"How are you doing, Harry?" MJ forces, her voice brittle.

They talk for a little while, superfluous, innocuous things, like this winter weather, and how the nurses are, and what medicines Harry is on. They're only allowed to stay for fifteen minutes, so time draws near to a close sooner than Peter assumed it would. He hasn't said a single word.

Harry's eyes are closing and his words are making less and less sense, so MJ takes a step back. "We're gonna take off now." She tells him, and one of his eyes open. There's even green around his iris.

"Pete?" He rasps. "Can I..?"

Peter shakes himself. “Yeah.” He takes a steadying breath. “Yeah. MJ you go ahead.”

“Are you sure?”

He looks at her for a long moment, nods, and she dips her head and steps back through the doors to decon.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks. 0 days, 21 hours, 3 minutes, 0 seconds

Alone in the room, the beeping and buzzing of Harry’s machinery is deafening, not unlike Peter’s own spider-senses when something has triggered them. He absently cups his wound beneath the scrubs.

Harry watches him wearily for a while and then plants a hand into the bed and shoves himself up, so he’s slumped into a semi-sitting up position. It’s a slow, frustrating attempt, but Peter doesn’t offer to help or say anything.

“I...” Harry smacks his lips and clears his throat. Peter slowly takes his water cup and helps Harry drink from it. When he’s done, he swallows and sits for a minute, breathing. His chest is a faint hue of chartreuse beneath the gown that falls off his shoulders. “I remember...some of it.” Harry doesn’t even pause, doesn’t let Peter process. “Stacy...did I...?”

Peter flinches. Turns away.

At his back, Harry trembles, “Did she..?” And then his voice breaks.

“Harry, not now.” Peter tells him. “This is the first time I’ve seen you in a year.”

There’s a cut off, agonized cuss behind him. “You don’t--I need to know.” Harry says, despondent and desperate. “Where’s Gwen?”

Peter is in unfamiliar clothes, gloves, a mask. There is a pressure behind his nose. He’s not even sure who he blames right now. Just that it happened. Just that there *is* blame.

“Peter, please.” Harry is saying thickly, now. Peter thinks he’s crying, though in seventeen years of friendship he’s never seen Harry cry. “Tell me.”

Peter turns to look at him. Harry whose eyes are red and watery, his hands fisted in the blankets. His best friend of almost two decades, small and frail and vulnerable, still faintly glowing viridian.

He might owe this to him. Harry has been sitting alone in a hospital room for a year now, and he still doesn’t even really know what really happened.

Peter has only talked about this once, but he approaches Harry’s bedside again and clears his throat. “The web broke.” He says clearly, surprised that his own voice comes out strong, albeit a bit high. “I got another one to her but she,” he revises, “But I didn’t get her right. It didn’t catch quick enough. The tension torqued her spine and she died before impact. My web killed her.” He works his gloves off as he speaks, restless. “I’m sorry. You knew her longer than I did.” Exposed, his hands wring the plastic of the gloves together.

“You’re...” Harry starts immediately, voice thick and wet and stronger than it’s sounded since he woke up. “You’re sorry?” It sounds a little like the old Harry, incredulous and crude and loud. Like he knows everything and has everything and the world should be viewed from the bridge of his own nose. “You’re fucking sorry?”

There’s a moment in which Harry processes it, and it shows across his face. His features twist. “You’re *sorry* ? Jesus, Peter. Christ. What the fuck. You’re sorry.” He sniffles heavily, and an on an outbreath lets out a noise that sounds dangerously close to a sob.

His next words are low and difficult. “You should have just fucking killed me.” He takes a breath. “When you had the chance.”

To Peter’s everlasting surprise, this is what stops him cold. After everything, he did not expect the emotion to well up because of something the former Green Goblin said. But the former Green Goblin is one of Peter’s only friends left in this world, and Peter’s breath catches.

He yanks his mask off so he can see.

“Killed you? You were delirious.” Peter says, though it sounds more like an accusation than a comfort.

“I knew what I was doing.”

“You and Gwen were friends.” Peter snaps. And then, “ *We* were friends.”

Harry’s head drops into his greenish hand. “We were.”

There’s a silence. Peter is still a little in awe of the fact that relatively he’s the one keeping it together in this conversation. Not to say that it’s not excruciating, because it is. He’s just had a lot longer to argue about it with himself.

“I..it..was mad at Spider-Man.” Harry manages. “I thought...it thought...you were killing it. I was dying.” Harry snorts, self-deprecating. “I still probably am.”

Peter rips hands through his hair, hesitates, and goes to sit lightly on the side of Harry’s bed. A few nights after Ben’s funeral, Harry had come to his house very late at night. He’d whisked Peter out of the house, led the way in silence for four blocks, down the steps, and through the turnstiles. They’d ridden the subway together all night, Harry a steady quietness by his side as Peter curled his arms around his knees and held himself together.

Peter still thinks about that night from time to time. It was bizarre; Harry probably did it because he didn’t know how to deal with Peter’s grief and had never seen grief himself before.

Now it’s Peter who sits beside Harry in the silence. The similarity seizes Peter’s chest, except this time they both lost something. This time they don’t even have each other.

“I’m sorry,” Peter says, and means it.

“Peter--”

“Harry, I don’t *blame* you.” Peter sighs. The walls are very bright. “I want to.”

Harry looks up at Peter, eyes sparkling. Slowly, like he’s piecing something together he says, “But you don’t.” He coughs. “And you’re sorry.”

“Yeah.”

Harry nods. Pauses. He says, “So who the fuck d’you blame?”

Peter clears his throat. “I still think about it. What what would have happened if I’d--Right, uh, right after all I could think about was you. Keeping you alive.”

“Strangling me.”

“I’m sorry.” He says again.

“Stop fucking apologizing.” Harry replies, that agonized incredulity still in his voice. A tear has made a track down the left side of his face. “*You’re* sorry. You didn’t even do anything.”

“She was there because of me.”

“Bullshit.” Harry snaps. He sounds even more like his own self, angry, cussing. Sure. “Bull-fucking-shit, Parker. I was the one who tossed her off the tower. You tried to save her.”

“Yeah, and I didn’t.” Peter cuts in, his voice a lot louder than he’d meant it to be. Harry is beginning to hit nerves; raw nerves, nerves that Peter himself has picked at for twelve months. “You don’t get it, okay? I was so *mad*, Harry. It took...” Peter stumbles, a raw noise building at the back of his throat, “The Goblin, he took both of you, and I...I couldn’t s--”

“Save her?” Harry finishes.

“Or you.” Peter corrects quietly. The silence that follows is telling

Harry wheezes. He’s still crying. “My dad--”

“Harry, stop.” Peter knows what kind of relationship Harry and his dad had. It wasn’t pretty.

“No. My dad...used to,” he breathes, “tell me that in life...things just *come*. You take it. You live.” He wipes at his eyes with trembling fingers. “I’m not your failure, Spider-Man.” Harry coughs again. “The...Goblin needed stopped...not saved...and you just have to...accept that. And the things that come with it.

“You...me...Gwen...we all made our choices.” He says. “And I’m sorry for the three of us.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means...you live with it. I don’t know who to blame. Me or the Goblin. You or Spider-Man. Me or you.” His eyes dip closed. “It means...I dropped Gwen and I went after her and I dragged her into it...and maybe you jerked her spine. It means we will carry that with us...until the next time we see her.” Harry coughs again, leans his head against the headboard. “Some of us sooner than others.” He peeks an eye open, another tear squeezing out. “She loved you. She loved you enough to die for you, and did from the moment she found out about Spider-Man.”

They hold each other’s gaze for a while. “I’ve never thought about it that way.” Peter says quietly. He adds, “She shouldn’t have had to.”

“No.” Harry agrees. “But I’ve had a lot of time to think about this.” He says, “And you’re not *you* without...whatever you get out of being in the suit. If you’re stupid enough to do some shit like that it has to be because it *means* something to you. Means everything. That woman knew that. Besides: you ever...knew Stacy to...do anything she..didn’t want to do? Huh?”

“Harry--”

Harry’s face twists again, fresh wetness spilling from his eyes. “You used to bitch about her...stubborn streak, Pete. She used to....tell you to...let her make her own decisions. But her choice was always you.”

And yup, Peter’s tearing up now too. What a shitshow. “Thank you.” He says.

Harry knocks a green hand against Peter’s. “I just..” His breathing is slow. Ragged. “I’m sorry, Peter.”

They’re just words, and they don’t mean anything. The Goblin still threw Gwen off the clocktower and he was wearing Harry’s face. Two words pale in comparison to the truth of the reality. At the funeral, a stranger had told him “I’m sorry for your loss,” and Peter had just glared at her because *of course*. Of course this was something to be sorry for, something to fucking mourn.

But now the words are coming from a faded green Harry Osborn, the only other person who shared in this tragedy. In all his years of being Spider-Man, Spider-Man has never been apologized to. He’s been slandered and accused and beaten--yes he’s been beaten--but the world has never stopped long enough to dip its head in acknowledgement.

“Thank you.” Peter repeats. “Me too.”

He says, and with the best timing in the world, that’s when the nurse busts in to deal with Harry’s fluctuating heart rate.

Peter gets an earful about dropping his gloves and mask, and he’s shoed out, wiping at his eyes.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 21 hours, 22 minutes, 0 seconds

On the other side of decon, MJ is holding her phone in her hands, her face and eyes almost as red as her hair. “What took so long?” She asks, “Were *you* crying?”

“No.” He insists.

MJ smiles at him. It drops quickly. She scuffs her shoes quietly against the floor and wonders, “Do you think we can forgive him?”

“For what, MJ? He was sick.” And then Peter really thinks about it. It’s easy to say that Harry was possessed by a sickness and didn’t know what he was doing. A good man might dismiss his actions outright, displace the blame, come to peace with it because the true evil, the Goblin, doesn’t exist anymore. Peter is not a good man. “I don’t know. It needs time.”

She glances back at her phone for a second and slides it in the back pocket of her jeans. “May texted me.”

“What?”

“Pete, why didn’t you tell me?” MJ asks without blame or anger in her voice. She’s just soft. “What today is.” She finishes. “We didn’t have to do this today.”

Peter just shakes his head. "I wanted to." Which is kind of a lie but also not one.

MJ searches his eyes a moment, and then sighs. "Did you find any sort of closure in there?"

He considers this a moment. Beneath his skin feels itchy. The pain meds have been metabolized, making his wound feel sticky and brightly painful. He feels awake. "Maybe." Peter admits, honest in a way he never really has been with MJ. "I don't know. It needs time."

"Okay. Are you okay?" She asks.

Peter scratches the back of his neck. His conversation with Harry is making him feel like he's just run up, like, twelve whole flights of stairs. Finally, he shakes his head. "No?" It comes out brittle, like a question. "I mean, not really."

MJ makes an aborted move like she wants to touch him but changes her mind at the last minute. A muscle jumps in her jaw. They've been here before, haven't they? Peter can't let people in because he can't afford to lose them. It's too late for MJ though. No matter how much he resisted, she found her place with him, like May has and Gwen did and Harry and, hell, even fucking *Deadpool* at this point, which Peter doesn't even understand.

"Can I do anything?" MJ asks.

He thinks on this a moment. "Yeah, actually." She covers her surprise, but not before Peter sees it. He takes off down the hall and she follows. "A few things. Don't tell May where we've been."

"Okay."

"Come over for dinner tomorrow."

"And?"

"And I don't need a ride home." He tells her. She starts to protest but he continues. "Please, MJ. There's something I have to do."

"Peter." She tugs on his arm to get him to slow down. "Don't do anything stupid." She's serious, her perfect eyebrows furrowed, eyes a crystalline, red-rimmed blue.

"I--yeah. I mean, I do a lot of stupid things. But I won't, MJ."

MJ nods once. "Good." And then she throws her arms around him and squeezes the bejeezus out of him. It actually really hurts, considering he just got stabbed, but he doesn't protest much past an initial surprised whimper. He wonders if his bones are creaking and reshaping beneath her arms.

"Thank you." She says when she lets go. MJ tucks a red piece of hair behind her ear, kisses him on the cheek. "Call me if you need anything."

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 21 hours, 26 minutes, 0 seconds

Peter takes an elevator to the ground floor and stops by the gift shop. He's chipping into his grocery budget for the month but he doesn't care. He pauses--briefly and very seriously--in front of the rack of helium balloons. In the end the inherent symbolism is too fucking morbid and cheesy even for him, so he gets his usual, pays with a fake smile, and leaves.

The train downtown is delayed, so he waits for five extra minutes underground. It's not busy--the rush hour is long over, and the station won't be filling up until rush hour tomorrow morning.. For now there's the regular mass of people. A homeless man stumbling drunk and getting too close to people, a tourist family, a few people who had obviously come from the hospital too.

He stands when the train comes, though there are enough seats. As a kid, coming into the city and riding the subway was his favorite activity. His parents would sit, but he would stand and cling to the railing, trying to set his feet apart just right to brace himself on the curves, stumbling and giggling when the train lurched and stopped and accelerated. Now he plants one hand on the upper hand cling and settles in. The train accelerates and inertia tugs him forward, to the side, forward again. He braces his feet and bends his knees and when the car brakes at his stop, he lets go, stumbles a little with the lurching, tumultuous stop, and gets off when the doors slide open.

When he emerges into the inky evening, Hell's Kitchen looks less intimidating than it usually does. Though he very much understands why Daredevil choses to clean it up, right now it's the most nonthreatening he's ever seen it. He doesn't venture far into the borough, instead takes a left and skirts the outside until he reaches his destination.

1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 22 hours, 0 minutes

It's very dark now but Peter doesn't much care. For the illusion of secrecy he walks around the side furthest from the street, toes off his shoes, and starts to climb. The clocktower is shorter than he remembers it, but the climb is tough. It pulls at his wound and leaves him out of breath quickly. Sweat pricks his temples. A low pain tugs his gut with every movement.

Peter finally makes it and skirts between the cogs in the clock until he finds the grate where he'd perched a year ago, and sits down. His legs dangle off it and he peers past them, into the dark bottom of the tower.

It seizes him for a moment, two, and he starts to panic. Why had he come here? What would he get from this? Because right now it seems a whole hell of a lot like the self-flagellation that it was six months ago. This place; the teeth of the gears, the white face of the clock, the rock grit of the brick--is a breathing memory. It's a weight. Right there is where the Goblin had smacked his head against the wall, and it had hurt, hadn't it? He'd had a bruise on the back of his skull, and probably a concussion. And there is where he had finally bested the Goblin, where he'd won. Where the conflict should have ended.

But it hasn't yet, has it? He's still fighting what should have ended a year ago.

His heart is beating so loud in his chest that he's surprised it's not echoing through this space. He wants Gwen here with him--not the abstract idea of Gwen that he's been mourning, but her solid skin and bones appearance. The warmth of her next to him. The gravitational pull she had simply by having mass.

She'd probably let him rest his head on her shoulder. If he thinks hard enough he can imagine what it might feel like to have her hands carding through his hair. Her voice is a whisper across the void here. He can't imagine hard enough to think of what she'd tell him, but there's something comforting just about the thought of her voice, what she would say.

Not for the first time he wonders what she would do in reverse; what if it had been Peter? They're useless musings; he has no idea what his own death would have looked like on the world around

him. The only thing he's certain of is that the Bugle might have a few witty headlines about it.

The clock screeches at the hour. Peter jumps out of his thoughts and watches the minute hand for a moment, and then checks his watch against it. 1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, 0 days, 23 hours, 0 minutes, 15 seconds. This is not as abstract as it used to be--he's not counting time away from an event or a memory, but from *her*. Because she's dead.

He's not physically well enough for this, but he edges off the grating and swings downward through the machinery until he finds the crag for his hand and fits it there, dangling.

He can't blame the adrenaline, but while watching Gwen fall he'd had a knee-jerk reaction. Save her. Catch her. Save her. Here is where he'd shot his web and watched her close her eyes.

He climbs further down until he's close enough to jump to the next perch. This new ledge is where he'd tied off the web that killed her. He might be crazy--the light is dim--but the metal has a single ring of discoloration around it. He'd cut Gwen down from the web to clutch her, leaving the remaining portion still tied off on the metal, where it had weathered away. All that's left is a discolored ring that he might be imagining.

Here is where she'd died.

He plucks the rose he'd bought at the gift shop from his pocket (it's only a little crumpled) and places it slowly. Then, from his pocket, he pulls a webshooter. It takes a few minutes to get it over his wrist and to click the cartridge in, but then it's a familiar weight on his skin.

Carefully, very carefully, he secures the rose to the rung.

He stands, shakily balanced, and looks at the flower for a moment. Then he looks past it. He's not going all the way down to the bottom this time--no weather gets into the tower so her blood is still there. Ripped pieces of his suit are still there. Both of their ghosts still linger, and six months ago he'd let them back in. He won't make that mistake again. He'll observe from a distance.

Down at the bottom of the clocktower is a place where time doesn't reach, ground zero, where it is always 0 hours and 0 days and 0 years since she died. Where time is always frozen in the moment that occurred between Peter jumping to the ground and Peter realizing, with a dawning horror, that she was dead.

Down there he is the Peter Parker who took the mangled body of the woman he loved and told her that he loved her for the last time.

Where he begged her still face to reanimate, where he watched blood snake from her nose and realized that she was gone from him, from the world. Here is the Spider-Man that thought he had already stood in the face of profound loss and come out on the other side stronger and unchanged, but in reality hadn't faced it at all.

Down there lies the moment that changed his life forever. And though he sees it on the backs of his eyelids when he closes them, he doesn't wish to *see* it again. He can't relive it anymore. There's only so much he can take and he passed that limit a long time ago.

It seems selfish, even now, but he doesn't want to hurt about this any more. He hopes that somewhere, someday, it won't be impossible to find peace with this place. Or maybe not with this *place*, but with the Spider-Man that's down there, the other real casualty that lies quietly in wait at the bottom.

One day he might find that peace with the Spider-Man that may very well have killed Gwen Stacy.

With the Spider-Man that was so hurt and so angry that he almost broke his fundamental rule when he wrapped his hands around Harry Osborn's throat. With the Spider-Man who thought himself infallible, whose stone morals and unfailing determination kept him on the streets at night rather than off them. Who felt that the good in the world needed only to be pulled forcefully out of it, and that he was *good* enough to finish that job. With the Spider-Man that *knew* unflinchingly that what he was doing was good, that he was saving people, that carnage and terror and death were a black and white issue that he could just erase. Gwen always used to tell him that he didn't like to see things past the binary.

It was naive. He knows that now. Of course it would be; Spider-Man was born out of a lonely sixteen year old's desperate terror and confusion. As a teenager he'd thought that Ben's death and a stupid spider bite gave him everything he needed to fix the world he lived in. Neither of them did, not because Peter had simply failed, but because neither of them *could*.

Down there is the Peter that never knew anger so white hot it was transparent, that never knew loss to be so choking that it felt like it could kill him, too. Down there is the Peter who'd thought, like all the others, that by simply catching Gwen he had saved her. Because that's how it worked. That's how it *always* works. That year-ago-Peter seems so young.

There is the Peter who thought the suit somehow made him no longer Peter, that drew thick lines between two lives and had the luxury of pretending like nothing crossed them both. That was naive too, something that Wade had shown him months ago. Wade had wedged himself into Peter's life, the only connection between his Peter persona and what was left of his Spidey persona that made sense. He'd been annoying and obnoxious and treated Peter the same way he'd treated Spider-Man, had quietly and subtly never differentiated between the two. Wade Wilson *is* Deadpool, after all; he's never known a secret identity, and inherently does not realize the personality split that comes with it.

Peter never could be himself with MJ, because he never loved her truly enough to let her bridge the gap. And in the end that gap was enough of him that it drove the two of them apart.

Harry told him that the suit makes Peter just as much as Peter makes the suit.

He'd told Gwen that Spider-Man and Peter weren't two different people.

They're not.

They still aren't.

A new Peter rose from these ashes; that is an undeniable truth. And he doesn't want to be that old Peter Parker ever again. So maybe one day he'll have brought enough roses to this place that their withered petals will have fallen and covered the entire bottom of this clocktower, so that the timeless horror that lives down there will fade. So that when he looks down, perhaps, he won't see blood or his suit or his ghosts.

He'll simply see petals of old roses.

Peter cranes his head and looks all those feet upward toward the clock. It ticks 57....58...59. There. That's 1 year, 0 months, 0 weeks, and 1 day that she's been dead.

He watches for a few more seconds. Counts them. And then he turns away, back toward the rose, toward the bottom.

Peter decides to stop counting.

Chapter End Notes

i wrote all 7k of this in 24 hours, edited it for grammar, edited it for content, freaked out and considered never updating again, edited it for grammar again, and then changed the formatting and felt 8 billion percent better about it. this one's been wild

Chapter Summary

“Okay. Wait.” Because now that it’s occurred to him, he has to say it. “Actually.” Peter says, something coming slowly to the surface in his mind. “Can I ask you something?” Peter finally says, slowly. He fiddles with the wrapper in his hands. “Shoot.”
“Will you be honest?”
Wade makes finger guns. “Brutally.”

Chapter Notes

i tried...so hard...to get this into one single chapter, but I'm 7.9k into it and I'm not ready and Peter's not ready so you're going to have to wait at LEAST one more chapter (probs two) until...you know...what we're all waiting for

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1 year, 0 months

Peter wakes to warm fingers carding through his hair. “Peter?”

He blinks blearily against the soft yellow of his childhood bedroom. “Whssit?” He slurs, “Time? Early time.”

May laughs at him from where she’s a blurry shape on his bed. “How are you feeling?”

Peter grunts. “Tired.” He says. He hasn’t forgotten where he was last night. He doesn’t know how long he was there, but it was probably longer than necessary. He doesn’t want to get out of bed today.

“Yeah?” May asks. “MJ made us breakfast. She leaves tomorrow and you have to eat something before you take your meds.”

“I’m not very hungry.” He croaks. Peter doesn’t want to get out of bed.

No, that’s not a good way of phrasing it.

He *can’t* get out of bed, because the world is too much, it’s too much, and he faced so fucking much of it yesterday. He’s sore into his tissue from yesterday, like he’s been smacked around by the Hulkbuster Armor. The thought of putting his feet into the carpeting and lifting upward is too terrifying. It’s too *much* .

Peter is not strong, at least he doesn’t feel that way.

May's hand stills at his forehead. A long look of exhaustion crosses her face and deepens into her eyebrows. She looks like a different person, aged and world weary. It's bizarre and terrifying to see his guardian as the person she is, the human being, a grown up human in a grown up body, guessing her way through the world the same way he does, the way everyone else does.

"I'm not going to force you." May says eventually. She fiddles with a loose thread on a sweater that Uncle Ben gave her ten years ago.

Peter can tell she's thinking of the darkest winter months of last year where she'd knock periodically and try to convince him out of bed, where he'd watch the shadows change across the room with crusty eyes and desperately try to shut his own thoughts away.

In prismacolor he sees who he was through May's eyes. How dangerous his behavior was. His waking thoughts bled so easily into nightmares and she was helpless against them, alone. And Peter wouldn't open the door. He thought that blatantly suffering in silence was some kind of self-punishment or a way to swallow the taste of a guilt so strong it still makes food tasteless.

He closes his eyes a moment and takes a long slow breath in to acknowledge the hot fuzz that is brewing along the edges of his lungs. It's not his Spidey senses, but sometimes his senses and his anxiety taste the same, sometimes they need to be dealt with in the same way too. By charging headlong into what scares him and lights him up inside.

"MJ probably wants to see me." Peter says, his voice wavery. It's not what he means at all, but May knows him well enough to read between the lines. "Breakfast. Meds. Back to bed."

One side of her lip curls. "Thank you."

She stands. Peter swings his legs over and sets his feet on the ground. He pauses for a moment, and then lifts up. It's like stepping out of a weighted sumo squat, Atlas reshifts the weight, but he does it. Peter does it.

Breakfast is quiet, but Peter still calls it a win.

1 year, 0 months

Wade

come to my hipster apt

in williamsburg

When ur done with whatever ur doing

bring your percs!

Peter

My percocets?

Absolutely not.

They'd be wasted on you, anyway.

Wade

spidey come AT me with the hand-wavey medical metabolism of genetically enhanced beings

The only reason they work for you is because of your hand-wavey medical metabolism that sometimes works supernaturally fast and other times doesn't.

Like damn make up ya mind and fix all the medica plot holes in this fkin thing

Peter

Are you sure you haven't already taken any?

Or something stronger than just percocets?

Wade

I have cheap chipotle

Peter

Is that what you're calling taco bell these days?

Wade

The bants are quality today

But seriously I'm waiting.

1 year, 0 months

Peter goes to Wade's. Partly because he's on the far side of campus and the bus is quicker to Williamsburg than it is back to Queens and his stitches are *really* aching and he wants to get off his feet. But he also goes because he has a morbid, genuine curiosity of what the hell the two of them are. Peter has his bet on tentative friendship, though they both have a lot to hold against one another. Wade is an erratic unknown with gray intentions, and Peter is mostly just a lonely douchebag so maybe it evens out in the end

"How's the stab wound?" Wade asks as he opens the door. He's not wearing his suit today, just jeans and a doubled buttoned long sleeved henley that looks to be a size or two too small.

Peter steps past him into the apartment. "You've been stabbed before."

"That I have Petey Pie." Wade agrees amiably. "You wannna beer?"

"I'm on percocets." Peter reminds and Wade snorts a reply of, "Apple juice then, got it."

"Food's on the coffee table." Wade continues as he disappears into the kitchen. Peter sits heavily on the couch, feeling his heart beat between the ten stitches in his abdomen. Not for the first time he laments how *stupid* that whole thing in the CVS was. Idly, he presses his palm over the bruising, which really hurts so he stops immediately.

The apartment does not look very different from the last time he was in it. The windows are wide and let in the last dredges of the afternoon sun; weak beams catch dust motes in the air. The carpeting and the couch are an unblemished fashionable gray, and the matching side table has a thin layer of dust over it. The television is mounted on the exposed brick wall across the room, and the coffee table laden with fast food bags is low and made of stainless steel and glass. Truthfully, it all makes Peter uncomfortable. Not only because of the way he'd exposed himself last time he was here, but because of the magnitude of information that Wade knows about Peter/Spider-Man compared to the amount of info that Peter knows about Deadpool.

"Where do you live?" Peter tosses over the couch toward Wade, who pauses, and then resumes his trek to the other side, where he sits down. "You don't live here."

"What gave me away? Is it too clean?" Wade replies dryly. He hesitates a moment and says. "I don't have an actual home in New York. Just several...safe places."

"You don't? Why not?"

Wade shrugs and carefully does not meet his eye. "Not really welcome here." He replies, reaching for a the nearest taco. Before Peter can even *think* about a proper response, Wade unpauses the television and settles back into the couch.

Peter sits quietly a few moments and glances at the screen. He's not sure what Wade is watching, but it looks like something Betty White is in. "Was there something you needed to talk to me about?" Peter asks, somewhat belatedly. He's already found a position on the couch that's comfortable and he doesn't feel like getting out of it.

"Hmm?" Wade asks. Betty White's character says something funny and Wade laughs softly under his breath in a way that Peter has never heard him do before. It stops him short.

"Never mind." Peter murmurs. "Toss me a taco."

"Soft or hard?" Wade asks, but he's absently handing over both anyway.

He unwraps the soft one first and bites into it, chewing absently. It's gone a bit cold already, but it's Taco Bell, and Peter is a 21 year old undergrad. He eats the whole thing messily before saying, "Thanks." around a mouthful.

Wade just extends his hand for a fist bump. Peter whines. "It hurts to move my arms."

"Baby." Wade snaps back lightly, drops his fist, and punches Peter in the calf instead. Peter kicks him. Which hurts.

"Ow, dammit." He cusses, hand coming down to cup his side as fresh angry pins zip up his obliques.

“Oops.” Wade replies noncommittally.

A few more minutes pass in comfortable silence. Peter figures out that the movie they’re watching also has Sandra Bullock in it. For some reason it’s making Wade all kinds of happy, judging from the way the scar on the side of his cheek is cracking open a little from his grin.

Peter eats his second taco and thumbs open his phone and checks his school email, texts MJ. Five minutes of the movie pass before Peter tries again. “Is something up?”

“What would be up?” Wade replies. He answers his own question. “The sky.”

“I mean, this isn’t weird for you?”

Wade sighs and rolls his neck on the back of the couch to look at Peter. “Why, do you *want* to fight about something?” He squints. “Politics? That always gets the Facebook people mad.”

“Wade.”

“Why are you like this?” Wade asks, but it comes out fond. “There’s no backwards motivation this time. Just hanging with my bro Spider-Man, two young fellows in the NYC.”

“Where you don’t even live.”

He makes a noncommittal noise. Peter isn’t sure he’s ever seen Wade like this; relaxed, unbothered, quiet. But, then again, seven months ago he’d never even seen Wade out of the suit. “Got some official business.” Wade says finally, glancing sharply at Peter. “Not that I’m being paid to be your friend anymore. That didn’t work out so well last time.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Yeah. But. Maybe if my aunt paid for my friends I would have gotten beaten up less in high school.”

Wade snorts. “You got beaten up? The Amazing Spider-Man?”

“Before I was Spider-Man.” He says and manages it almost casually, though Peter has never in his two decades of living ever had a casual conversation about him being Spider-Man. “Lanky nerdy angry kids are not exactly prom king material.”

“I bet.”

“What, like you were any better?” Peter snarks back thoughtlessly, and then immediately regrets it.

There’s a half beat and then Wade’s lip quirks up as he turns back to the TV. “Fuck, Parker.” He jokes, thumb coming to rest at the deepest scar at the base of his neck. “I’m *still* prom king.”

“Right.” Peter replies, their building rapport dissolving. Wade’s tone is just on the wrong side of flippant. “So, New York?”

“Right.” Wade mirrors. He reaches for another taco, his henley riding up in the back, showing the top waistband of a pair of Calvin Kleins and an intricate and asymmetrical web of scars stretched tight over two muscles on either side of his spine. “You remember Doctor Squid breaking out of the Raft like seven months ago?”

It takes him a moment. “You mean Doc Ock?” Wade had bled all over his floor that night and Peter had scrubbed hands into his face for hours and tried to caffeinate away the taste of insomnia, tried to blame his sweaty pale skin and beating heart on too much espresso.

“Whatever. Something’s up with Raft security. Not sure yet but SHIELD’s keeping the troops rallied just in case.” He shrugs. Wade hesitates, whispers something to himself, and then, “We could use you, you know.”

Aw shit. Here they go. “For what? Sounds like you have a handle on it.” Peter says carefully. He’s too tired for this right now.

Wade’s response is instantaneous. “It’s your fuckin’ city.” He snaps. Peter wonders what he’s missing in the superhero world that’s making Wade so snappy. Before he can ask, Wade is sighing and backing up from the statement. “Shit. S’not what I meant. When Vanessa--” Wade’s eyes widen and he cuts off abruptly, wetly, and launches immediately into, “You know, Daredevil doesn’t much like me, so it’s no fun being the last two thirds of Team Red.” He deflects. “Also, Cap is not all that nice, fuck what everyone says. And I can’t even get a fucking cheeto in this city without some hopeful fucker asking me if I’m Spidey back from the dead.” He turns up the volume on the TV two notches, and then turns it down one. “It’s annoying.”

Peter wants to press it. He really really does. Vanessa.

“You shouldn’t have copied my suit, then.” Peter says in a slow voice.

“Fuck you, you copied *me* .” Wade snickers, deflecting again, settling back into one of his long rants that Peter used to think he was crazy and annoying for. Wade’s jaw works. “There’s only one of us now anyway, it shouldn’t be so goddamned difficult.” He says. “Anyway, Cheetos. Spidey, are you a crunchy kind or a puff? I like the spicy; the chemically enhanced red goes with my aesthetic.”

Being on this end of things is kind of eye-opening, and really weird. Two words and he thinks he understands Wade’s motivation a lot more than he did before.

“You can tell me, if you want.”

“Tell you what? You know they make casseroles out of spicy cheetos? What are they called? Shit, flaming hot. Flamin’ Hot Cheetos” The TV goes up two again, down one.

“Wade.” Peter states.

The silence that folds over the room is heavy.

“I was just--” Wade starts. “Shit. Fuck you, okay. I was just going to say that when Vanessa--When she died I didn’t want to take any more hits. Didn’t feel like being a mercenary anymore.” Wade says with the same whip-quick tone he’d been using before, though his voice has dropped. “Fucked around, tried to join the Avengers. Superheroing isn’t really for the emotionally traumatized either, as it turns out. No matter what the damn movies and their sob story backgrounds try to get you believe.”

“Okay.” Peter says, mind whirling. Vanessa. “You wanna talk about her?”

Wade fixes a tight smile on his face “Nope.” He says. “And I know you don’t either. Thanks for playing.” Which is a valid point, Peter probably wouldn’t be able to handle whatever Vanessa and Wade’s story is, but Peter is looking at Wade like a new being right now. It’s blowing his mind.

“You can, if you want.” Peter says finally, unable to keep the awed confusion from his voice. Shit, he *really* gets why Wade would never leave him alone. “I probably won’t be very helpful but I will--” he stops short of saying *understand* because he probably won’t, because he doesn’t know anyone who has grieved Gwen in the way that he has. Nobody has his pain. It’s his to claim. “Try.”

Peter finishes.

“Okay,” Wade drags the word out long. “Right. Gotcha.” He’s clearly still uncomfortable, but the humor is back, and Peter knows much better than to push it now. “I’ll raincheck. Cool beans.”

“Right.”

“Righto neighborino.” Wade turns to the television, waits until there are a few moments of lull, and then starts., “So. That was...strangely emotional? Are...are *we* dating now?”

Peter rolls his eyes. “Hand me another taco and shut up.”

“Sorry, if I don’t get a joke in every eight minutes the execs threaten to cancel my next movie.”

“Okay. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Really? Everyone else got it.”

“Okay. Wait.” Because now that it’s occurred to him, he has to say it. “Actually.” Peter says, something coming slowly to the surface in his mind. “Can I ask you something?” Peter finally says, slowly. He fiddles with the wrapper in his hands.

“Shoot.”

“Will you be honest?”

Wade makes finger guns. “Brutally.”

Peter sighs.

“Do you think I killed her?” He asks, rushing it out just so the words can be free of him.

He looks at Wade intensely; now that the question has been asked the answer feels like the most important thing in the world to him. Wade is by no means a moral point of comparison, but Peter knows that Wade *means* something to him, that whatever he has to say will mean *something*, just because Deadpool is the one thing that Peter never got rid of in those dark six months after Gwen’s death.

Wade just kinda....gets it...in a way that no one has attempted to.

On the screen, Sandra Bullock is doing a breathless song and dance rendition of Get Low by Lil Jon. The song floats around them, irreverent and wrong and perfect, considering the company and their tendency for unintentional irony.

“Do you think I killed her?” Peter asks again when Wade gives no inclination of answering. His eyes are fixed on the screen, chin in his hands, elbows on his knees. His shirt is riding up in the back.

“Peter, I kill people for a living.” Which. Right. Peter had *definitely* used that as something to hurl at him a few months ago. “You don’t think I know shit about anything.”

Peter can’t really argue with that, because that is the sentiment that both Peter and Spider-Man had tried to portray to Deadpool over the years. “I just--” He doesn’t know how to convince Wade to give in. But he needs this. “This can be last strangely emotional moment you and I ever have, Wade, please.”

“Fuck.” Wade replies. He pauses again. “Okay.” Another pause. “Was it an accident?” Wade finally says, in a way that’s half question, half statement.

“Yeah, but...” Peter swallows heavily.

“Did you want her to die?”

“No, but--”

“Did you do everything in your power to stop it?”

“I mean, I--”

“Do *you* think you killed her?”

Peter fiddles with the wrapper more and then, “I’m asking you.”

“Well shit, Spidey.” Wade pauses again and sits back. “Yeah. Yes.” He says softly, but it’s still a slap in the face. He abruptly looks over at Peter and studies his face a moment. “You did.”

“But I thought--” *killing someone versus failing to save them.*

“You didn’t save her.” Wade says importantly. And then, “Do you get what I’m saying?”

Peter’s mouth pops open. “No?” He says. Pauses.

And then.

He gets it.

1 year, 1 month

Dr. Kaplan suggests that Peter find an “outlet for his aggressions.”

This, of course, miffs him. “I have a right to be angry.” He returns.

She’s amused. She’s like that a lot, and the irony of the fact that that pisses Peter off does not escape him. “You do.” She agrees. She smooths an invisible wrinkle in her dress and leans back on her leany chair. “Feel free. Take that right, if you want it. Do you? Do you really want to hang on to it? All that anger? All that helplessness?”

Peter finds an outlet for his aggressions.

He signs up for a yoga class. It’s a Thursday after he gets out of work. Thursdays are lab days, so he’s tired and weary and unmotivated. He debates skipping the class, but doesn’t, in the end. He does it through EState’s student recreation department, so it’s free, which is another nice bonus.

It’s an hour and a half long--an hour of power yoga for strength and then half an hour of vinyasa focused yoga for serenity. The class is full of women, who each give him a side-eye as he sets up

his borrowed mat in the back of the room. Peter grumbles a little under his breath.

At first, he's just irritated. He sees Dr. Kaplan twice a month; she doesn't know him. He's being trying to look for an "outlet" for a year now, and it hasn't worked, and above all it's not been healthy. He's hasn't even gone near his webs since he figured out that the only way he's going to be able to get back into the mask is when he's good and ready, rather than because he thinks it'll solve his problems.

And as for the question of getting back into the mask at all?

Peter isn't ready yet. The idea of it still makes his stomach turn in the same way that sleeping in the same bed that someone died in would.

But.

He might be ready one day. It's a matter of accepting, as Harry and Wade said, the choices that all three of them made that night. He knows this now. It's a matter of forgiving himself of a crime a whole year after he tried and executed himself for it.

It doesn't matter if he killed Gwen or didn't save her. It doesn't matter if it was Peter or Harry or Spider-Man or the Goblin. It doesn't *matter*. There may be a difference between killing someone and saving them, but because Peter failed to save her, he *has* to accept the fact that he had a hand in killing her.

He has to take responsibility for what happened.

He killed her. He didn't kill her. She's dead. That's it. That's the bottom line. The end. Roll credits, no falling action, no resolution. Just fact. A cold tombstone and a patch of grass. Twelve months of an empty apartment. A half-finished degree for a dead girl who won't ever need her education, a broken mother who moved three hours away and then moved back, a handful of scraps of a hero who didn't belong in his own skin, let alone his suit.

Bloodstains on concrete. Nightmares. Memories. Good ones, bad ones, fights, dates, study sessions, parties, celebrations, hand-holding. They were there. They existed and they're gone now.

Is that what Harry was getting at too? In life things come and we're given no choice but to take them. It comes, and you take it. Even when *taking* it is unfathomable. Even when *taking it* is like bamboo splinters beneath fingernails, like being cut to ribbons with long, slow, sure strokes of a molten knife. Like peeling back skin and muscle and organs in layers just to see how much it hurts for dirty fingers to touch living innards.

Peter watched Gwen Stacy die with his own eyes and still didn't believe it afterward, because it came too quickly, and taking it meant coloring the world without her. She was such a presence, and the idea that Peter himself had been there when she was erased was disgusting and terrible and scary, just really fucking scary.

Peter didn't save her. He was there that night and this is what *happened* and he didn't choose to let her die but he did choose to be there. To love her. To be with her. To put on a mask and help people. There was always risk of getting hurt.

Gwen knew that.

She chose to love him anyway.

So yeah, maybe one day he'll be ready.

He thinks he might want that--not necessarily for New York or the Avengers or the Bugle or for Gwen, but maybe for himself. Maybe for himself.

Yoga is nice, but he doesn't find nirvana, or whatever. It just makes his hip flexors ache and his heart yearn for the city skyline.

The thought crosses his mind and then he's yanking his phone out of his pocket and going back to the student wellness page where he'd signed up for the class. A few clicks later and he's signed up for a different one.

Photography. An old love.

1 year, 2 months

They're waiting for the train for *two minutes* when it happens. (Peter knows this, he's been watching the arrivals board, which tracks the subway in real time.)

They're going to midtown because Tate *still* feels bad about Peter getting stabbed in the CVS because the kid has a guilt complex that probably rivals Peter's. Peter has told him that it was his own fucking fault (because it really really was) but the message hasn't really gotten across yet. If anything, the incident was a wake-up call. Besides, it's not like he died.

Anyway. They're going to midtown because Tate is buying dinner and Peter is a real fucking mooch and only weakly protested when he offered to buy.

Right. So. They're waiting for two minutes. A few moments after the train changes from 1 MINUTE to DUE, there's a scream. And they're underground, so Peter understands a little better why they call it a "bloodcurdling" scream. That shit is terrible. His senses grab him so hard he has to arch his shoulders and tip his head back because it's like something is physically touching him at the back of his neck.

Down the ledge, a petite woman--5'3 with black hair and freckles, wearing a navy pencil skirt and a thin polka-dotted blouse, holding a blackberry between perfectly manicured fingernails--jerks away from her phone, where she'd been having some sort of serious conversation.

"Oh my god," her phone goes flying to the side. "Oh my god, Charlie. *Charlie* ?!" She throws herself to the edge of the platform, where her (son, probably?) Charlie, is still screaming. And it's still bloodcurdling, enough so that Peter thinks he's probably going to go blind with all the sudden commotion melded with his senses.

Peter is jumping down onto the tracks before he even thinks about it. He lands hard on his right ankle and lurches away from the rails. He's been a New Yorker since birth and isn't stupid enough to touch any one of them, even when he knows which one is live and which two are not.

And behind him Tate says something like, "Peter, the train is fucking *due* !" But Peter has sprinted all the way down to the kid now, who's got a pretty grotesque broken leg from the fall. Peter can see the bones beneath his skin and it's not pleasant, not at all. Bones don't belong that way and apparently, judging from the way that his mouth tastes dry and acidic, this is yet another issue he's

going to have to sort through. At least he won't have to touch this kid's leg. He won't feel the hard shift of bone bulging beneath skin hopefully ever again.

"Charlie, oh my god, baby, it's gonna be okay, it's gonna--" The mother jerks her head to Peter. She's crying already. "Please, oh my god--"

The kid is all-out wailing, blunt nails scrambling at his jagged leg. He's twitching around wildly, and when he sees Peter looming, Charlie jerks backward in fear. It sends another pained scream from his lips.

It also sends him very, *very* close to the live rail.

"Oh my god." Black-haired business lady screeches. "Oh my god."

Peter tunes her out, because she's not really an issue right now.

Hey, remember when Electro tried to take over the city? Electricity *hurts* . Like. A lot. And the 600 volts that's running through that rail would kill both of them, spider bite or not.

Peter darts over rail one and crouches down. "Hey Charlie." he says to the kid, who is crying and bleeding and clutching himself. He's scared out of his mind. "I'm Peter."

"Peter, the fucking train!" A very helpful subway patron by the name of Tate Brock tells him, which spurs the mother to start outwardly wailing.

"I'm gonna pick you up now." Peter tells Charlie. He's probably seven, with big welling blue eyes and freckles just like his mother. His face is very red from screaming.

Peter doesn't think his spider senses could get *any friggin louder* but hey, they can, because, as helpful subway patron Tate Brock so helpfully reminded, *the train* .

"No, no no no, no, please." Charlie says, "Don't touch me."

"Sorry kid." Peter says because those are headlights from around the bend and this is a lot more dramatic than it needs to be, dear god.

So, Peter scoops up the kid who howls right in Peter's ear, takes one bound and then jumps up to the platform. It takes a little super strength, but people don't notice, because they're all too busy watching the train *just* miss Peter and the kid.

Peter tucks and rolls onto the platform with the kid secured in his arms. He's just reeling onto his back when the hot blast of chemical wind from the train rushes past him, and his arms don't loosen from the kid's shoulders. "Holy crap." he says, heart beating somewhere that's like ten feet above his head.

People start clapping. The train starts to slow. Peter blinks his eyes open and sees the customary crowd has gathered. They're still clapping.

The mother, on her hands and knees, perfect hair flying, skirt ripped a little, scrambles next to Peter to get a comforting hand on her boy. By now the police have been notified and there's a response team on the way.

"Holy crap." Peter says again. The subway slides to a complete stop and the doors hiss open right over the spot where Peter was just standing.

“Holy *crap* .” Peter breathes, adrenaline just now hitting him. He wants to laugh, despite the fact that he was seconds from death, seconds from watching a seven-year-old and himself get flattened. But they didn’t. They’re both alive and breathing so Peter doesn’t stop the incredulous rumble of chuckles that shake his chest for a few moments. The mom is smiling in the same holy-crap way, though Charlie is still sobbing,

The stretcher gets there and they take Charlie from Peter’s arms. The mother stops them all for a half second, turns to Peter, and says. “I don’t even--”

Peter waves her off. She looks like she wants to hug him, but it’s kinda disgusting on the tracks and his favorite oversized black sweatshirt is nasty so he just says. “His leg will probably be okay. He’ll bounce back.”

“You saved his life.” She tells him evenly, mascara all over her face. “If I hadn’t...I looked away for *two* seconds, I can’t believe.”

“Ma’am.” He says. “He’s gonna be okay.”

Her eyes fill with tears again. “Thank you.”

Peter just shrugs. She turns away to follow her son and the EMTs.

The cops asks Peter for his statement, a part of the process that’s tedious and boring and Peter is super glad he’s not usually around for this part. By the time he’s done, it’s well past dinner time.

They don’t got to midtown for dinner at all.

Instead, Tate just hits him really *really* hard in the arm. “What the hell. That was amazing.” He frowns. “Is this common for you? I feel a lot less bad about the CVS thing, man.”

Peter laughs.

Later, outside of the McDonald’s where they’re both eating large fries and three burgers a piece, Peter wonders. “Is it too late for a Harambe joke?”

Tate hits him again. Harder, this time, if that’s even possible. “In every single sense. Jesus.”

1 year, 2 months

Harry actually has more bad days than good ones. This should not surprise Peter as much as it does; it’s not like he just had the flu. From a cellular standpoint, Harry is genetically and biologically changed. It’s fundamental.

Peter is three years into a genomic engineering degree and probably should understand that.

When he gets there, he’s not even sure why he came. Last time wasn’t the worst and he thinks he might have gotten something out of it, but it also *was* the worst and it hurt him more than a lot of other things have in the past few months.

Truth is, Harry should be at Ravenscroft or probably the Raft, but instead he is at the research center here at NY Presbyterian. NY Presbyterian takes visitors. So Peter visits.

The nurse warns him when he gets there; they had to use the bed cuffs today, and nothing on the other side of decon is pretty. Peter goes in anyway. Again, he doesn't really know why.

It's not quite the exorcist level of bad, but the whole Your-Mom-Sucks-Cock-In-Hell vibe is definitely there, especially when Harry tries to get to Peter's core by stating that less than savory things happened between Gwen and Harry down in the basement Oscorp over those *long, hot* summers they shared together. Before and during Peter's relationship with her.

Peter knows it's not true but he gets out of there anyway. It's hard not to see the person in that hospital bed as the Green Goblin. This Harry doesn't have any of their friendship left. This Harry is angry and sick and wants to hurt Peter in the same way he'd wanted to hurt Spider-Man. Through Gwen.

It makes him feel hotly desperate as he shucks his mask and his gloves on the other side of decon; for the longest time Harry was the only thing that Peter had. For the longest time they only had each other; Norman Osborn was a real piece of work and Harry hated him, and Peter was lonely and scared and unshakably raw from the sudden and unanswered loss of his parents. It's not atypical for rocky starts to form solid bonds, but most friendships without the right foundation crumble after two and a half decades. Harry and Peter's problem was not their foundation.

He storms from the Neuro ICU angry and hot around the edges, pissed off and once again unflinchingly hurt. He's a handful of minutes away from home but doesn't have the patience for public transport. There was an early April ice storm a few days ago that the city has yet to turn into oil-slicked slush, so walking requires concentration that Peter just doesn't have.

Years ago Peter had Ben's killer beneath him; he could have killed him. Maybe he should have, but he didn't (and still doesn't) believe he has any right in taking a life, no matter how many lives that life has taken. Spider-Man never confused himself with God.

But he remembers Ben's killer beneath him the same way he remembers the goblin's frigid breathing beneath his squeezing fingers. That hatred inside himself scares the hell out of him still, but it's not new. It can't be. He's been broken like this since he was seven years old.

1 year, 3 months

It's the hottest day of the year so far; the first good one since the thaw in early April, so New Yorkers are out in droves.

It's good for Peter. He's rigged up his old Nikon and has himself easily situated in Sheep's Meadow, a backpack full of water, two pb&j's and a textbook he's going to try to sell to the used bookstore since he's hauled himself out to Manhattan.

He's mostly just screwing around. Peter prefers action shots to landscapes, and if he did anything with these pictures he'd need consent. He's not feeling particularly social today. Peter hasn't taken a photograph in almost sixteen months, and before that he hadn't taken one that wasn't of Spider-Man or Gwen for even longer.

There's a couple on the grass probably a hundred yards away, near the treeline, fifteen kites in the sky. The clouds drift heavy overhead, a promise of rain left unchallenged. Peter ducks his camera

down to scroll through what he's taken, admiring them for a moment before deleting them. He thinks it might be creepy if he keeps them.

A kid letting go of a balloon, his face caught forever in that moment right before he starts to cry at its loss. Blue eyes wet, mouth turned downward, palms open, grasping. His shirt is stained with ice cream.

One woman leaning toward her partner in what seems to be an act of polite intimacy, but closer inspection shows that she's stealing a chocolate-covered strawberry from her girlfriend's plate.

The girlfriend realizing this and smashing the strawberry in her face.

A baby crawling in the grass, mouth open in delight, a single tooth gumming through its mouth, one hand raised upward in triumph.

A dark looking young man perched in the lowest limb of a nearby tree, his leg dangling. His back is against the bark, his brows fixed in furious curiosity as wrists covered in bracelets trace around what could be either a sketchbook or a journal.

Three old women in quiet savasana on purple yoga mats.

Above him, a bird squawks. A feeling settles into his bones and Peter lets his head jerk up. The clearing has quieted, not subtly enough to go unnoticed.

Before this can freak Peter out, he spots the two figures pacing their way through the footpath that darts around the meadow. The clearing gets quieter as more people recognize them--Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson out for a Sunday run.

Steve is wearing an Under Armor t-shirt that Peter recognizes immediately to be the oldest new piece of clothing he owns. There's sweat along the ridges of his temple, his eyes clear and focused.

Sam looks his usual brand of pissed off. Peter hasn't ever had the chance to work out with Cap, but he gets the memo. It's tough. And, they've got at least two miles to go to get back to the tower, more if they're heading to the mansion. Sam is almost grossly sweaty and he's breathing heavily.

Peter freezes where he is, wonders if he can be situated to be smaller in his position in the grass. From where he is against the tree he's close enough to the footpath that both of them will see him.

They reach Peter steadily with even strides and heavy footfalls. Peter ducks his head and tries to look at the pictures but he can't ignore the bone-deep *something* that tells him to glance up.

Peter makes brief eye contact with Steve as they blow past, but then he's gone. That's it.

Later that night, through the crackled receiver of a jerry-rigged Stark SHIELD cell phone and the fuzz of a time-worn voice message, Steve says into his ear, "Son." He starts, "When you can...you know where to find us."

1 year, 3 months

In the dream, Doc Ock is getting married. He's in his garish costumes, and each one of Otto's groomsmen has a hold of one of his metal arms.

Peter is there too, the only one in attendance without his suit on. He is, instead, wearing a tuxedo.

Beside him, Wade hands him a bottle of silly string. Peter looks down at the canister absently. "Is this vegetarian?" he wonders, because what the hell even *is* silly string.

Wade shrugs. He's in full gear, but every gun holster and knife ring is full of silly-string. His katanas are, in fact, made of hardened silly string.

"Are your webs vegetarian?" A voice whispers from behind him. Peter half-turns in his pew and then half-groans into a face palm.

"Stop asking me that." because Tony has absolutely asked him that before. Also, "Are you *crying*?" Peter asks him. Tony's eyes are red-rimmed and his face is pale.

"No, I'm drinking again." Tony retorts, hastily wiping at his eyes. At the front of the church, Electro, who is the officiant of the ceremony, is asking Ock to read his vows.

Wade tosses Tony a bottle of silly string. It hits him hard in the stomach and Tony lets out an *oof*. "Don't even joke about that, Tin Dick."

"Fine. Yes. I'm crying." Tony makes a face. He looks down at the canister in his hands. "Love is beautiful. Whatever." He says petulantly, and Peter wakes up.

He blinks blearily at the ceiling in his room.

What the fuck.

He tells Dr. Kaplan, "I had a dream a few nights ago." About weddings and costumes and Tony Stark and silly string. Seriously?

Dr. Kaplan doesn't take a lot of notes, but she picks up her pen. "A nightmare?"

"No." Peter says, still fucking confused about the whole thing. Dr. Kaplan puts down the pen. "Just a dream."

1 year, 3 months

Wade calls at three in the morning and for once Peter is asleep and doesn't answer. Wade calls again, and this time he blinks an eye open.

"Actually asleep that time." Peter mumbles, wiping his palm across his eyes.

"Boo hoo. You got a favorite dive place in SoHo?"

"SoHo?"

"Yeah. Mr. Manhattan, you've been into the big city before, right?"

"I can't say Spider-Man did a lot of work in SoHo." Because art theft is not all that common, weirdly enough. Crime rates in lower income areas, however, are a lot higher. Peter would think all those TV shows about shit going down at the docks were BS if not for the fact that he's visited the dock worker's lower income government subsidized houses more than a few times.

"Wrack your brain, kiddo. Dumpy restaurants? Shitty corner pubs? Some place with pulled pork. I want pulled pork."

Peter sits up in bed and reaches for his glasses. Without permission, his jaw cracks into a huge yawn. It takes long enough that Wade gets impatient. "You there, Spidey?"

"I'm here." Peter says, his soft palate still raised and his voice coming out smooth and sleep-heavy.

"Okay so get with it. Food. SoHo."

"It's three in the morning."

"Hence the need for a dive restaurant."

"What am I, Guy Fieri?"

"Hell fuckin' yeah Petey, take me to flavortown."

Peter groans, growing irritated. "Is this all you called me for?" And then he rubs at his eyes a moment and asks, because they're friends now, right, it's his damn duty. "Are you okay?"

"Petey-Pie. Spider-Man. Four Eyes. I--" Wade falters across the line. "I can't say that anyone has ever asked me that before. Innit that fuckin' pathetic." his voice lowers. "Fuckin' pathetic."

Peter's mouth tastes tacky and his room is very dark. He looks at the shapes in the darkness and counts to five, listens as Wade's rambling mutterings dissolve into long streams of words that are too low and do not make sense.

Ah fuck.

"Are you in danger?" Peter asks. He gets out of bed, his feet touching the ground heavily. It's cold in his apartment.

"Hey, man, I *am* the danger." Wade replies brightly.

Peter rubs his fingers at the back of his neck and reaches the front door. It unlocks with an easy click. The chain sticks as it always does, but he takes that off too.

"Okay." Peter agrees. "Come over."

"I--What?"

"Door's unlocked. Thai is in the fridge." Peter yawns again.

"Are you sure?"

Peter sighs. "Not really." He says, because his life has been bizarre and disheartening and Peter has never felt more alone or abandoned or helpless. Because Wade knows about Spider-Man and Gwen and Peter shouldn't trust him with *any* of that, but it hasn't backfired on him yet. Peter is tired of being afraid of what's next, of keeping parts of himself dormant and in constant vigilant fear. Peter is tired. "I'll see you when you get here."

1 year, 3 months

Peter doesn't mean to fall back asleep, but he dozes. The sleep is light enough that when his door creaks and opens one eye cracks open with it. He watches Wade take a hesitant step inside and close the door, locking it, and putting it on the latch.

"Are you bleeding?" Peter asks. It's hard to tell; Wade is in the suit.

Wade honest to God *jumps* . "Jesus."

"Just me. I live here." Peter reminds, and Wade's shoulders tense. "What happened?"

Wade turns. Puts a finger on his nose. "Superhero business only, Spidey." He says, and moves into the room more. Peter sees immediately that he's walking with a limp. "But, hey, I'm no hero either. Your friends are dicks." He detours into the kitchen. A beat, and then he returns, carrying the white foam take-out box of noodles.

Peter groans lightly and sits up. He stretches upward, feeling his spine pop as it aligns, his shoulders opening wide. "More issues with SHIELD?"

Wade has paused in the middle of the room, clutching the container. He's watching Peter. "Duh." Wade says finally, hooking two fingers beneath his mask and tugging it just under the bridge of his nose to eat.

Peter can't help it; even in the dim light of his living room Wade's scars look livid today, like they're angry at something. The one that curls over his chin has the same color as blood clots inside a cut of chicken, dark magenta and smarting. There's one on his throat that looks like Wade has been skinned, the worst kind of roadrash.

Wade turns, abruptly, and says. "Fork. Need a fork."

"Uh. Third drawer from the fridge." Peter says at his retreating back. Peter checks his watch. Almost four thirty, and he has an interview for his scholarship internship position downtown today at 10 AM.

Wade comes back and collapses next to Peter on the couch. He ducks his head and digs into the noodles cold.

Peter bites his lip and can't help it, he asks. "Do they hurt?" Because he's just as much insensitive as he is curious.

Wade, to his credit, just pauses. Peter is staring like an asshole but Wade doesn't return the gaze, just sets the carton down on the coffee table and looks at it for a moment. "Today?" He asks, finally, no need for clarification on what 'they' are.

"In general."

"Today." Wade nods, a repeat of the word but spoken like an answer. "Mostly, uh," He shucks up

the back of his mask to the deep, nasty one on the back of his neck. “Mostly this one, on normal days.” Probably because rubbing at the back of his neck is a stress habit.

“Can I...” Peter makes an aborted movement and forgets to wait for the consent; his fingers are lingering on Wade’s skin around the edges of the scab before he can pull them back.

Wade tenses and says, “S’where they--” He cuts off but doesn’t make Peter stop touching him. Instead, Peter feels the ridge of the wound for another heartbeat, and then slides his hand to Wade’s shoulder, which he grips firmly.

“That sucks.” Peter tells him. “I’m sorry.”

Wade laughs once, through his nose, the noise familiarly self-deprecating. He shrugs, dislodging Peter’s hand. Maybe they’re not at the I’m-Sorry-Your-Life-Sucks part of their relationship yet. Maybe Peter is reading into all of this wrong.

But then Wade is saying, “Thanks,” All gruff and low. He pauses just long enough that Peter knows it’s sincere before saying. “I can’t believe you don’t know any shitty restaurants in SoHo.”

Peter shrugs and moves on right along with Wade. “The people that gave me free food were mostly downtown or in the boroughs. And I’m broke. So. Free food.”

“That’s a blatant misuse of power, Spider-Man.”

“Dude.” Peter actually laughs a little at that. He moves a little further away from Wade to plant his back against the couch arm and kick his feet up, his knees toward his chest. “You don’t think I’ve already punished myself for that?”

“Good God.” Wade says around a mouthful, “You are by far the angstiest human being I know.”

“The bite probably magnified that too.”

“You’re saying you would be better off without it?”

Peter checks his watch again. “I don’t blame a spider bite for my shortcomings, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Ha. Comings.”

“Shut up.” Peter says. “Do you? Do you think it would have been better without Spider-Man at all?”

Peter can’t see--it’s too dark for it and Wade still has them covered--but Peter is absolutely certain that Deadpool rolls his eyes. “Shit, Parker, why does my opinion all the sudden matter to you?”

“Because you’re my last connection to this world.” Peter says shortly.

Wade snickers, pulling the now-empty Thai carton closed. “Well I’ll be damned.” He says. “You already know how I feel about this. Of course I wanna see your ass back in spandex.” He barrels on before Peter can protest the statement. “Saving people, not-killing things. You know what they say--” Wade leans in conspiratorially, “You gotta get back on the high horse sometime.”

“They don’t say that.”

“Whatever. At one point you thought you were doing something good, Petey. And around that time

I thought you were a smug, holier-than-thou prick with jokes.” Wade snaps his fingers. “And, funny story, I *still* think that. So maybe you’d *still* be doin’ something good.”

“That was backhanded.”

“I’ll back your hand.” Wade tosses his fork on the coffee table. “Now get the hell up, I’m sleeping on your couch.”

Chapter End Notes

EDIT 12.12.17: There is now [art](#) for this chapter! Wow! Shoutout to the annster!

1. in the comics Vanessa doesn't die (well, she does but only briefly) but this is an au so shhhh
2. i do hella yoga for stress relief. if you want to find an "outlet" (maybe not necessarily for aggression) i would 100% say try yoga.
3. they are totally watching The Proposal, and Wade finds it funny because it has Ryan Reynolds in it. So yeah, there's your fourth wall break
4. The entire bit of banter from "That was strangely emotional...Are we dating now?" to "Really? Everyone else got it?" has been sitting in my notes section at the bottom of this fic's google docs since probably chapter 1, and it still makes me laugh. So, i'm super glad that i FINALLY got to a point where i could get it in and hopefully the humor is there for y'all as well.

skin

Chapter Summary

“It’s just--” And her voice is thickening again, getting airy. May is crying again, like she can’t hold it back. “You reminded me so much of him tonight, Peter.” She says, hands tightening. “Your Uncle Ben would be proud.”

Chapter Notes

this was supposed to be out before homecoming was whoops

1 year, 3 months

Peter wakes to a finger pressing deep into the muscle behind his shoulder blade, then retreating. Peter gets poked again in the same place, and now that consciousness is fiddling back to him, it *hurts*. Webslinging did a number on his shoulders, and the knots beneath the blades have never really come out. Gwen used to get her thumbs into them and spend fifteen minutes on each shoulder just easing out the knots, but since she died Peter hasn’t had anyone to get underneath his shoulder blades (he can’t reach) so the knots have remained.

“Wake up.” Wade pokes him again, just below the blade. Peter is sprawled on his stomach, his arms above his head and underneath the pillows, spreading out his back muscles so when Wade pokes him again, hard, it catches his breath.

“The fuck,” He mumbles into his pillow. “Hurts.”

Wade pokes him again, “Huh? What did you say?” he asks loudly, which means he knows full well what Peter just said, the dick.

“Go away.” He says into the pillow again.

Wade pokes him in response.

“I swear to God,” Peter pops his head from the pillow. From his position, his head is looking in the opposite direction to Wade, but at least his voice won’t be muffled. “If you don’t--” He senses, rather than feels, Wade’s finger move and spins to grab his wrist.

Deadpool blinks down at Peter, still in his full-suit, katanas hanging limply from his back. Peter lets go of his wrist to fumble for his glasses and check the time. 7:15.

Peter groans. “Stop waking me up.”

“But--” Deadpool whines, which is very unlike him, considering. “Hey, why didn’t you wake up when I first came in the room? Shouldn’t your spidey senses have buzzed?”

Peter just sighs and scrubs hands underneath his glasses and over his eyes.

“Are you back to ignoring yourself, because that seems like an odd character development, considering. I had to poke you like, a dozen--”

“*Please* stop talking.” Peter tells him, mouth dry, head pounding. He already feels the exhaustion and he’s not even out of bed again. Now that he’s sleeping again, he’s less numb to the feeling of sleep deprivation.

“Grumpy. Okay.” Wade says. “Listen, I want to take you somewhere.”

Oh, *boy*. “I have an interview.” And oh hell yeah he does, *shit*. Peter yanks the blankets off and manages to detangle himself from his warm bed, scooping up last night’s shirt off the floor as he goes. “Take me somewhere?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Peter wrestles the shirt over his shoulders and tugs it down, blinking at Wade. Finally, he turns away. “I bet you tell that to all the girls.”

Wade snorts as Peter turns toward his closet. “Only the pretty ones.”

“Gross, okay, never mind.” Peter flicks the closet light on and digs around a little, tossing his slacks on his bed, digging out a laundry basket full of Miscellaneous Clothes in the back with his heel and sending it skidding behind him. He pulls a white-pressed button down from the closet and pauses to look at it. It’s still starched. It’s only been worn once.

Peter digs his fingers into the collar just to see it deform a little. This isn’t even a reminder of *her*. Those are still everywhere--her toothbrush is still in the medicine cabinet above the sink, her favorite mug from the grand opening of the Queens Target that she drank tea out of still sits dirty on the counter, a flash drive still blinks from Peter’s computer and Peter hasn’t opened it up to look through and nor has he removed it, hell, there are still some damn *bobby pins* that he keeps finding literally *everywhere*. Those are all reminders of her.

This shirt is just a reminder of her death. Gwen and Gwen’s death are two different entities altogether; even a year away from her and through the darkest parts of his grief Peter has always known that. No, this is the shirt that Peter wore to her funeral, a shirt that Gwen never touched or saw and it’s the only nice button down he currently owns but he has to fucking *pause* and think about if he can even stand to wear it again.

Meanwhile, Wade has gone quiet behind him, which is probably a bad thing.

(It is.)

Peter turns to find that he’s dug through the laundry basket of Miscellaneous Clothes like the snoop he really is. Wade has dug past the old ties that Peter has kept (and the reason Peter pulled out the basket in the first place), the winter clothes, and gotten to the bottom of the left side, the place where Peter had shoved his mask after the last time he wore it.

Said mask is now in Wade’s hands.

If it weren’t for the shirt that Peter had clutched in his fingers, he’d snatch the mask back immediately. “Don’t touch that,” He snaps.

Wade just looks up at him, delicate gloved fingernails idly tracing the raised polaroid edges of the

eye pieces.

“Put it down.” Peter says, measured.

The red is almost the same color as Wade’s own suit, if a shade lighter, the black spidering webs coming up the cheeks and around the head threading and misformed from age and misuse.

“Wade, I said put it down.” Peter urges again, frozen on the spot. It’s *weird*, this feeling, like being flayed open. Here it is in cement: This is my Mask. This is me.

“This is weird.” Wade decides, turning the mask over in his hands, shaking it a little, letting it ripple. He glances from Peter to Spider-Man’s faceless, shapeless mask a few times.

“It’s sure as shit weird, stop touching it.” Peter’s voice has gone high, pink warmth soaking into his cheeks. The hanger in his hand that holds the starched shirt creaks a little from the way Peter is holding it. “Put it *down* .”

“Gimme a sec.”

“Right now, Deadpool.” His voice sounds exactly the way he wants it to--clenched teeth, low fury, cold in a way he hasn’t managed in a while.

“Just--hold on,” Wade says, like this is funny, like Peter’s true irritation is going over his head. It probably isn’t--Wade Wilson *lives* for irritating people, *lives* for pushing buttons, for sly smirks and long-winded rants, for itching just underneath skin where everything is uncomfortable. It’s what makes him brilliant and underestimated, and Peter can’t help but fall victim to it now.

Wade sticks his hand into the mask.

His hand spreads and the mask spreads across his palm, which gives it a faux bone structure. Wade looks down at Spider-Man.

Mirrored eyepieces and webbed detail sit and do not stare back. They’re blank and inexpressive, fluid, tight. Designed in red and blue and how stupid, how wonderful is that?

Spider-Man looks fragile in the early morning light of his apartment, and he is; spandex doesn’t stop the bleeding, and the man that wore this mask is dead.

Peter looks away, down at his hands which have ruined the top lines of the shirt in his hands. There are wrinkles along the shoulders now; they are the shirt’s only imperfections.

“Put it down.” Peter finally says, softly. The world has gone a little wobbly, he’s seeing double in kind of a bad way. He’s not stupid enough to think that the dampness in his throat is anything other than what it is. “You should go.” He finishes.

“Look, Spidey, I *really* just--” Deadpool takes an aborted step forward but Peter has always been quicker, reflexes subhuman moreso than Deadpool’s.

His knees drop slightly in his step forward, head coming up, shoulders tensing. He meets Deadpool’s eye and clenches his jaw. “You just what?” Peter asks in the slow way Spider-Man used to use when he was making fun of the people he was about to web to the wall.

“You gonna fight me over this?” Deadpool asks dryly. His thumb sweeps at the bottom edge of the mask, folding the cords of spandex around, eyes not leaving Peter. “We’re not past this?” He shakes the mask a little like punctuation. Peter feels hot along his neck, behind his ears.

He forces himself to smooth out the lines beneath his hands. "I'm not asking again."

Deadpool clicks his tongue. The mask is still in his hands, but he brings it up slowly and hooks it into the mouth of the hanger in Peter's hands. Then he turns on his heel and leaves.

It's not until the door has shut and the apartment is quiet again that Peter glances back down.

The mask is hung from the hanger, the hook giving the top of the mask a vague sort of shape. It folds down over the neck lips of the shirt's collar. Absently, Peter feels along the seam and tucks the bottom of the mask beneath the shirt collar, the white a stark brightness at the neck.

He sets the outfit carefully on the bed next to his slacks and his belt, and looks for a moment. A threadbare old Spider-Man mask and an imperfect perfect dress shirt.

1 year, 3 months

Peter shifts his padfolio from one arm to the other, clears his throat. "Um," He tells the smiling receptionist, "In the email I was supposed to be meeting with Mr. Zelfoni? Senior director of recruitment?" He asks her, because ten seconds ago before stepping into the elevator she'd said something *very* insane along the lines of "Mr. Stark is waiting for you," which is really the last thing he needs right now.

She smiles at him. "You're a Maria Stark Foundation Scholar, aren't you? You've met him before." She winks, "You must have made a good impression for him to personally handle your interview."

Because, okay, yeah, through this scholarship he's guaranteed an internship but he'd thought that meant filing paperwork and fetching coffee and today's interview was going to have them judge how low on the totem poll he'd be for the next four months.

"Uh, I, uh, think there's been some sort of misunderstanding." Peter swallows against the top button on his white shirt.

She smiles wider. "Oh, honey, don't be nervous. I'm sure you'll do just fine." And then the elevator doors slide open.

Tony is standing there in threadbare jeans and an AC/DC t-shirt, his arms crossed over his chest, a grim non-smile fixed through his goatee.

"Good morning, Mr. Stark." The receptionist says.

"Thank you, Rebecca." He tells her, a brief smile lighting his face. He turns toward Peter. "Good morning, Mr. Parker." He says, and Peter has *no* idea what he's gotten himself into.

Rebecca winks at him again as Peter steps out onto the floor and follows Tony toward a spartan desk nestled in a corner office and sits down. Through the windows, it's mid-morning in New York City, a cloudless, beautiful May day. The people look like ants, and for a moment Peter wishes he was higher, that he could feel the bite of the wind on top of this skyscraper.

Tony has been quiet, but hands him a file folder, jerking Peter from his reverie. "Tell me what this is." Tony says.

Peter flips it open. Closes it again. "I don't think--" he stands and moves to leave but stops when Tony holds out a hand.

"I got a cease and desist letter from Homeland Security, eh, about two weeks ago." Tony says conspiratorially, "Apparently bugging a government operative like SHIELD is some sort of punishable offense." He smiles, then, a little slick but mostly sincere. "Please. Sit down."

Peter sits.

"Tell me what this is."

Peter opens the file again. "DNA work-ups." He says quietly.

"Whose?"

"Electro." he flips. "Carol Danvers." Flip. "Tony--uh, you." Flip. "Steve Rogers" He pauses, eyes widening. Cap has a lot of blank spaces on his paperwork, enough so that anything vaguely related to the serum has obviously been redacted. "What is this? These are," he pauses, confused, to look down at a fucking punnett square that explains why Steve Rogers has blue eyes. "This is, like, the whole Mutant Division at SI. Big names." Peter flips the page again feels his mouth dry, "Spider-Man." He says quietly. His own file is almost completely blank, thankfully, only a guessed age (25 years) and a projected weight (187 pounds). "Who has all this information? Isn't..isn't this--" *highly dangerous and lucrative information* . He flips again, faster now, reads, "Clint Barton? Frank Castle? Wade Wilson? How did you get this shi--stuff?"

Tony quirks an eyebrow. "The reason I'm not sitting in jail right now because I let you root around through SHIELD's servers is because it exposed how weak their firewall was. I got these," he gestures, "Off the internet."

"The--are you *joking* ?" Peter clenches a little too hard at the sides of the folder. A long time ago Wade had called him naive for trusting so blindly in his own identity. He feels like an idiot, too closely tied to Spider-Man.

Tony shrugs. "It's a mad world, Mr. Parker." He pauses. "Look, can I be straight with you?"

"Uh--"

"You know everything that Spider-Man knows, right?" Tony asks without room or leeway. "About SHIELD and--" He trails off with a wave of his hand.

Peter sets his jaw, alarm bells going off. "Why would you think that? I made his tech and took his pictures."

Tony freezes a moment and then leans back into his seat, taking a sip from a mug that has Cap's shield on the side. He swallows and then says. "I could speculate. Give you my best guess." He says. His face is passive, almost concerned, but the tug of a smirk makes Peter go cold all over. "Care to confirm anything today, Mr. Parker?"

Peter manages a tight, "No, thank you."

Tony sits forward again, setting the mug down. "Good. We'll leave my guesses be." He says, and just as abruptly as they started to go off, the alarm bells silence. The cold that swept up his spine fades out. "So, you know what this means, right? You're up for the job?"

"What *job* ?"

“Confirm what’s pertinent, rebuild the dossier on my own servers, and get rid of the stuff on the good guys.” He answers. “Capiche?”

“I--what? This was supposed to be an interview for a..for a data entry job with--”

“This sure as hell is data entry. Just...delicate data. Far as the interview goes, I know almost all of your academic achievements. Hell, I’ve read your college essays, Peter, I know who I’m hiring.” Tony stands. “Start at seventeen an hour, do good, discrete work, and we’ll see about fixing you up with Dr. Banner in the fall.”

Peter chokes. “Dr. *Bruce* Banner?” He asks, as in the world’s leading scientist who deals with the most groundbreaking DNA mutations *in all of science* . As in the Hulk.

“Or Richards, if you prefer.” Tony sends him a wicked grin. “We take care of our own here at Stark Industries. Plus, you come recommended.” He says, and winks, and Peter feels woozy like he’s been hit over the head.

So he’s going to be responsible for the foundation of the Mutant Division’s, and by extension the Avengers’, datamine of knowledge on the whole of the supervillain underground, including the scientific reasons behind their powers and their hatred and their *everything* . Documentation to understand these hurting and broken individuals who taste death and want more, who inflict fear and terror and violence. To learn what sits in their molecules that makes them the way they are. To learn who they are. Like Sewage Man or Dormamu or...or the Green Goblin.

It sounds like a foundation for a future. What kind of future, well, Peter isn’t so sure.

1 year, 3 months

When he gets out of Stark Tower after a lengthy chat with HR (he starts Monday..Monday!) Wade is leaning against the outer wall near the door. Peter is still reeling from the interview, sweating a little at everything that was revealed, at the fact that his future as Peter Parker looks like the muted version of what his future as Spider-Man looked like. And he’s *okay* with that, in fact, it makes something inside him burn, light up, an oil lamp in the middle of a floating, dark cloud.

“Hey!” Wade says, and Peter jerks, does a 270 on his heels and blinks, confused.

“Hey?” He asks.

“I brought you something.” Wade says inelegantly, thrusting a brown paper bag into his hands.

“Uh.” Peter says, just as inelegant. Someone on the street bumps into him, and sends Wade, who is still in his suit, a nasty look. “What is it?”

Wade gives him a Look, and Peter yanks the bag open. It smells heavenly, greasy and hot. “Pork?” He reads off the side of the plastic container. “Barbeque sauce? Oh. Pulled pork.”

“From a dive bar in SoHo.” Wade says proudly. “Told you so.” And then. “Cause I ate all your food last night...and slept on your couch...and--this is the place I wanted to show you this morning, s’all”

“You didn’t--” Peter feels weird and can’t figure out why, if it’s the job, if it’s Tony knowing something about Spider-Man and Peter, if it’s Wade.

“Listen, I’ll get out of your hair for a while, ya dig? I’m incapable of hanging out with the cool kids, anyway.” Wade plasters on a big bright smile and hits Peter in the shoulder in what is clearly an awkward way of trying to be a bro. A car whizzes through traffic behind him.

Wade turns to leave.

Peter pinpoints the feeling, the buzz through his limbs, the restless, light-on-his feet pound through his muscles. It’s not fear. It’s something solid and undoubtably *good*. It’s Tony Stark keeping his goddamn mouth shut, it’s Wade Wilson bringing him lunch, it’s a new job.

It’s Peter. Standing on two feet.

“Hold on, wait up” Peter says, catching up to Wade in the few feet he’d managed to get away. “Did you have any of this?”

Wade sends him a small look. “No.” He says, too quietly.

Peter rolls his eyes and manages the edges of what might one day be a grin. “Fucking martyr.” he accuses. “There are two forks.”

1 year, 4 months

After dinner on Sunday, May turns on some British television show that holds Peter’s attention for all of five minutes.

“Pete,” May says into the fuzz, amused. “If you’re going to fall asleep, go home.”

Peter snorts and doesn’t open his eyes. “I am home.” He pouts, “Why, am I boring you?”

There’s a long enough pause that Peter cracks an eye open. May is smiling a small, private smile that Peter doesn’t think he was meant to see. “You have work in the morning.”

Peter grunts and shifts, getting more comfortable against the arm of the couch, pulling May’s oldest quilt farther around his shoulders. “Work shmerk.” He tells her, but it makes May laugh because he did spend at least fifty percent of dinner talking about how good his new job is (in a roundabout way, just like he used to do with Spider-Man.)

And it *is* good, right now he’s working his way through a write-up of what’s left of the info about the Skrulls, and his supervisor said that maybe they can get some of the samples shipped into the lab to make a fuller report. It’s more information than Peter has ever cared to know about a Skrull, and he used to bash the damn things’ brains in.

Also, the seventeen-dollars-an-hour thing is...nice. Peter can afford things now. This month he brought a *fresh* rose to Gwen’s grave and it didn’t even cut into his toilet paper/grocery/textbook budget. He’s never in his life gotten checks this big; after the first one hit his direct deposit, he went straight to Whole Foods. Of course, the only thing he got there was a seventeen dollar cut of steak (only one hour of work!), and then he went home and popped it in a pan full of butter and

garlic. Once cooked to a hot pink center, he cut it in half to save some of it for the next meal (he is, unfortunately, still on a budget) and brought the other half out to the fire escape with a glass of sparkling apple juice. He carved into his steak and watched the sun descend through the buildings, watched the summer evening bleed into the breeze and the sky. It was the type of celebration he and Gwen would have had, quiet and unassuming. For the first few moments, the scene felt gapingly empty of her, but he raised a silent glass, turned on some music, and tried deliberately not to think about her. It felt wrong, but this was in no way about Gwen, and Peter is trying to honor her memory, not just drag it around like it's something to be ashamed of. It's hard not to do that if he's white-knuckling her.

May says, "Peter, I'm serious. Don't want you falling asleep on the subway," and it jerks Peter out of his doze again, warm and lethargic. This time when he cracks his eyes open the light is slanting differently through the windows, the sun pretty much gone. It's rounding on ten PM.

Peter closes his eyes again. "You're right." He says without moving, and May pinches him.

"Belligerent." She accuses, but it's fond.

"Alright, alright, I--" He's cut off by the sound of one of the neighbor's backyard umbrellas tumbling over and hitting the side of the house. There's not a lot of room out there (none, in fact) so it's not a foreign noise at all. Peter sits up though, and rubs at his eyes. "Did the Jamesons get a new cat? I thought they had three already."

May makes a noise; the commercials have ended and her show is back on, "I don't know, probably. They're on vacation." She says.

Peter checks his phone and clears his notifications and says. "I'm just going to grab my charger from the kitchen and get out of your hair."

May is absorbed in the show and doesn't respond. Peter will get a proper goodbye out of her before he leaves.

He locates his work bag at his chair at the table and yanks his phone cord out of the wall, putting it in the bag and zipping it up. The kitchen is dark and he didn't bother with the light, so when the flashlight beam sweeps into the room, he freezes dead on.

Aw, dammit. He was having such a nice night.

The muscles behind his neck tense up, a little, the hair rising on his shoulders. He spares a glance back at May in the living room and pauses. Out the window over the sink, a person moves through the Jamesons' glass back door.

"May?" Peter calls, eyes fixed to the murky shadow and the white-blue of its flashlight. "Did you say the Jamesons are out of town?"

It's a moment before she responds. "Yes, Peter. Why?"

"They're being robbed." He says, matter-of-fact.

"What?" May says, aghast, and then the remote clatters, the TV turns off, and the couch shifts, the unmistakable sound of Aunt May getting to her feet. Peter's blood cools like he's stepped into an ice lake as she approaches behind him.

She places a hand on his shoulder and peers out the window around him. He can tell the moment that May sees them because she recoils into an actual, physical step back. Her fear immediately

tightens his neck muscles harder. Fifteen feet away from his Aunt are dangerous, probably armed, people who *mean harm* .

Dammit .

“I’m calling the police.” She tells him, squeezing his shoulder and moving toward the wall-mounted phone. Peter has a moment to feel like he’s starting to drown in this ice-lake, that there’s frozen water in his lungs and he can’t stay afloat, and then he looks at May’s face. “Please go lock the back door.” She says quietly, white-knuckling the phone, hands shaking as she dials. She’s still looking at Peter, face drawn and pale and *afraid* . This woman with steel in her backbone, the person with the stone-ground accountability that Peter has always aspired to have--

Peter had his mind made up as soon as his Aunt got off the couch.

He shakes his head. “No” he says, “lock it behind me.”

He pushes away from the counter and May rockets after him, “Don’t you *dare* go out there, young man, I swear to--yes, hi,” May stops, the phone cord pulling and the 911 operator picking up. Her eyebrows draw in and she makes several angry flailing hand gestures into a *get back here you insouciant brat* that Peter turns away from as he clicks open the door. He takes care to shut it behind him and hopes May locks it.

Outside, the air is heavy with humidity, and the sky is already conceivably darker than it had been five minutes ago when Peter opened his eyes. A few stray frogs are chirping already, and overhead the clouds are heavy with rain. Still, Peter’s senses are clearing, his heart beating louder and heavier. Inside, adrenaline prepares him the same way it always has. And maybe it’s a reaction fueled by a cocktail of *fight* and *fear* , but Peter is ready.

Maybe ready in a way that he hasn’t been until this moment. This is his first conscious pursuit of danger in months.

Hell, he’s in his bare feet, wearing only a pair of shorts and his hoodie, but he kicks up the hood anyway and lets his aunt fuel him across the lawn.

Inside the Jameson’s house, the shadows have moved from the sliding glass back door, but Peter sticks to the darker spots in the yard anyway. He’s not a dumbass, so he doesn’t hit the umbrella on his way in, and instead eases his way into the house in the pounding dark.

The robbers are making a lot of noise and haven’t turned on any lights, which means they’re probably newbies looking for a quick buck. They’re clearly in the upstairs master bedroom from the harsh, clipped whispers and the sound of splintering wood.

On an idle second-thought, Peter glances around for some sort of weapon and doesn’t find any. It’s not like he has webshooters, but he’ll have to deal.

Peter forgoes the stairs entirely in case of of them creaks. Instead he climbs up the wall with his bare hands and feet. The feeling of being parallel to the ground is a little disorienting for a step or two, and then comfortable. It feels like he’s sixteen and getting used to his powers again. He remembers those months acutely and if he weren’t literally in the middle of an armed robbery he’d probably smile at that. He ruined *so* many pairs of jeans with skinned knees and road rash.

He pauses at the landing to take a steadying breath, though he’s still steady on his feet. The voices are closer up here, angrier, and there’s a tang in the air of gunpowder that Peter’s mind if probably making up, but better safe than sorry.

He should devise some sort of plan, but he kinda knows what he's doing.

Peter creeps to the mouth of the door to the master bedroom and leans against it. Inside, two ski-masked men are digging through drawers, while a third has managed to get his way into the safe. He's emptying it into a pillowcase that he's stolen off the bed.

None of them notice Peter, too busy bickering and plundering, so he cuts in, loud and a little bit smug. "Well, howdy." He says, and they all jerk to a heart-pounding stop. He imagines what this looks like--some skinny kid in the shadows in the middle of a robbery. They probably can't even see his face it's so damn dark. "You don't live here." Peter states while they're still dumbfounded and stock still.

The closest one to him takes a breath.

And then a step back?

"Son of a--" He starts. But Peter cuts him off by sweeping his feet out from under him. He hits the ground hard. However, Guy 2 and 3 are now springing to action as well.

Guy 3 vaults over the torn up bed with a crowbar, and, seriously? Peter catches it before it comes down. "What are you, a stock photograph?" Peter asks him, because ski-mask-crow-bar...the only thing he needs to complete the image is a bag with a green dollar sign on it.

Peter yanks the bar and sends Guy 3 into Guy 2, who has a gun but no gun training, judging by the way he was fumbling with it. The gun goes flying, and Guy 2 and 3 do too, landing straight into the soft part of Guy 1's sternum on the ground.

"You guys are kinda bad at this." He tells the groaning pile.

Which is when, from behind him, a gun clicks. "Hands up." Which is real swell, because that's not a cop, that's a previously unknown Guy 4. Peter takes a second to think it through. No webshooters, so disarming isn't much of an option. He's not faster than a bullet.

The only thing he's got is a mouth and he sure as hell knows how to run it. "You probably shouldn't shoot me." He says, and Guy 3 gets to his feet. *Dammit*. Guy 3 is smirking. "That would not be your brightest idea. Granted, armed robbery isn't exactly *bright*, per say."

"Shut the fuck up." Guy 3 tell him, swiping a switchblade from the pocket of his (black) jeans. Apparently Guy 1 and 2 are out cold, because they're still only twitching on the ground.

Peter rolls his eyes, adrenaline washing his fear into gallantry. He gestures harmlessly to the knife. "That supposed to intimidate me? I've literally been stabbed in the last four months."

Guy 3 takes a step forward, which, hello, mistake. Peter counts on his reflexes to be too quick before taking a step in turn, crouching, and *ramming* his shoulder into Guy 3's waist, hefting him up like a WWE wrestler. He lifts them both backward into gun-toting Guy 4. The three of them hit the wall hard--two skulls impact with the wall while Peter's impacts with the meaty center of Guy 3's belly, and then they're all on the floor.

Peter is, luckily, the only one still conscious.

And then, *finally*, *a little late there boys*, the lights outside flash red and blue and the cop sirens wail heavy. Peter slumps back against the thieves and breathes.

1 year, 4 months

Peter is like, thirty seconds away from being arrested. Like, he's already been cuffed and roughed up a little. Luckily, that's when Aunt May comes flying out of the house clutching a magazine babbling about her stupid nephew. It takes a while, wherein Peter sits grouchy in the back of a cop car with Guy 3 who glares daggers at him, before they get it sorted out. In fact, the cops only let him go when gun toting Guy 4 pounds on the glass of his own car and shouts "Jesus fucking Christ the kid is not fucking with us." which should have been *obvious* by the fact that the four guys were unconscious and Peter was not, but whatever.

A friendly beat cop opens up his door and yanks him by the upper arm out of the seat. He unhooks the cuffs, which were much too tight.

The news is here, and the three or four reporters who see him start getting louder. Luckily, Peter ducks his head and turns away, and his hooded sweatshirt does the rest.

The cops take a preliminary statement to sort out the details, though Peter and Aunt May will have to come i to the precinct tomorrow morning to make a longer statement. Peter gives his explanation with his back to the press and his fingers clenched.

This is completely not fun in any way and very reminiscent of his old days. Back when he was a new vigilante, the cops wanted nothing more than to cuff him and unmask him. Of course, they never did, and Spider-Man has actually never made an official legal statement, so he's still considered a public menace. Now, however, the only people who really stick to that sentiment is the Bugle; most cops think it's cool when they see him. (Most cops thought it *was* cool when they *saw* him, dammit)

The cop peers at him for a moment after he's done, and then shakes his head, muttering something Peter chooses not to hear.

He ducks his head and walks to Aunt May, who has her robe and slippers on and her arms are crossed heavily. It seems that the only reason she brought the magazine outside with her was to roll it up and *hit Peter over the head with it* , so Peter endures at least twenty seconds of that while Aunt May gripes heavily at him and the police pull the would-be robbers away. The press starts to break down their stuff and finally Peter wrestles the magazine away from her.

He's exhausted, suddenly, as he unrolls it. May has tears in her eyes, so he says. "I'm sorry, May, but I couldn't just stand there and let it happen." Which is only a half-truth, the larger reason was because his aunt is the only thing he has left, but he's not about to tell her that.

May's face *drops* then. Peter has no idea what he's done wrong because she starts *crying* , something Peter hasn't seen her do in years. May loved Gwen, but May put on a strong face for Peter's benefit, because at the funeral and the weeks after that she was his only solid ground.

Now, her arms hug around herself and she's shaking slightly, breath stuttering in. Peter seizes, awkward and unsure of what to do before stuttering, "What did I--May--I," and does the only thing he knows how to do by sweeping her into a bone-crushing hug.

The first morning after Ben's funeral was a Saturday, and Peter remembers creeping through the quiet house that morning. He remembers the strange feeling of being lost in a home he'd lived in

for almost a decade, trailing his fingers over the table and the couch like they were all new and foreign.

May was out on the front porch that morning--now that he thinks about it, that's where she'd been the night before. Peter remembers feeling more childlike than he'd ever felt, but at the same time knowing that this was his first step into adulthood, his adolescence and what scraps that were left of his innocence left in the street where his uncle had bled out.

He'd hugged her then, an anchor in this new turbid sea.

Now she sinks into his embrace and lets go. It's disorienting to see her like this--parents don't cry. Peter clings to her tighter, there in the street, as the sky blackens and darkens, and thunder growls overhead.

1 year, 4 months

"I'm being silly." May tells him later. He's staying the night; it's after midnight and he has to be at the Queens police station tomorrow anyway, so he emailed his boss for a sick day. "Silly." May's voice is a little hoarse, a little self-deprecating.

She's kicked back next to Peter in Peter's bed, having come in under the guise of telling him goodnight. Now she's tugging slow fingers through the long hair at the crown of his head, his skull tucked against her hip.

He feels seven again, but he's not. He's an adult who has made so many mistakes, who has broken his aunt into pieces. This is not irreparable, of course not, but he knows her humanity enough now that she feels more like a person rather than the Power That Be she was when she wouldn't let him have cookies for breakfast.

Still, it feels really good, to just be here. To shrug off the post-fight haze with someone who unquestionably loves him.

Peter *hmm*s in response to let her know he's still listening.

"It's just--" And her voice is thickening again, getting airy. May is crying again, like she can't hold it back. "You reminded me so much of him tonight, Peter." She says, hands tightening. "Your Uncle Ben would be proud."

Peter wonders if she knows just how much that means to him, but that's stupid.

Of course she does.

1 year, 5 months

Peter gets a call in the middle of the workday. His eyes are crusting over from the amount of

paperwork he's read today, so he saves his work and pulls away from his desk to answer.

"Hello?"

"Oh, Spidey, thank God." Wade says, breathless on the other end. "Let me preface this with I'm the worst and you hate me and I'm the worst but--"

"Slow down."

"Okay, shit, if I was in, like, mortal peril, would you help me?" Deadpool asks.

"I'm at work."

"Mortal peril, Peter!" Deadpool yells, overdramatic, into the phone. Peter has to lift the receiver from his ear so his eardrums don't blow out. "You would fall at the altar of our Capitalist Gods instead of saving your best pal's life?"

"Best pal?"

"Jesus *fucking* Christ I liked you better when you were quieter." Wade pouts. "Holy shit, is this what it's like to talk to *me* ? God *damn* , Parker, I'm so fucking annoying."

"That was a super convoluted insult." Peter points out, and Wade lets out a frustrated noise that Peter takes a secret delight in. That is until there are other noises in the phone, like grunts and shots and something wet and oozy sounding. "Are you *actually* in mortal peril?" Peter asks, and then gets dizzy, really fucking dizzy, because he knows what this phone call is.

"Um, yeah." Wade says, gasps, and then goes, " *Ow, fuck* . Look, I tried to fucking preface this with, y'know, how I'm the worst and you're totally allowed to hate me--"

"You couldn't call anybody else?" Peter asks. He's not ready, he's not--"I don't have a suit." He tells Wade, and holy shit he might be yelling right now. "How the hell do you want me to help you?"

"Um--"

"You do *not* get to do this to me." Yeah, he's yelling, and his eyes are a little wet, this is very embarrassing. "This is why I wanted you to just go *away* when I asked you to leave me alone. I'm not--I can't--you don't just get to manipulate me back to--you don't get to use what you know against--" he suddenly can't get his sentences out, they're white hot and burning too much air. "I don't have a suit." He manages, a strangled gasp.

"Woah. Woah. Calm down. Yeah, shit, I'm the worst. Not asking for shooters, though."

"You're not?" Peter asks, slumped against the wall, head in his hands.

"Not yet." Wade replies. "Peter please," Wade says, his voice high and desperate. He's pleading. "Trust me?"

Chapter Summary

And he says. “Spidey,”

He says, “Please.”

Chapter Notes

this is not actually the last chapter, bc i split in half

if you notice that this is choppy than the rest of the (already choppy) narrative it's totally intended for it to be that way. interpret that as you wish

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

1 year, 5 months

The guy on the fire escape landing is expecting a nerdy kid. He's not expecting super strength, so Peter plays into it. He's not Spider-Man right now, he's not. He's *Peter*, whatever that means.

Peter leans heavily on the railing, the thin rusted strand of metal on the dangerous side, the one that threatens twelve stories of plummeting death. “Whatcha doin on the fire escape?” Peter asks slowly. He pushes his glasses up his face. Adjusts his backpack. “You’re kinda in my way.”

He'd been milliseconds from pressing the button to buzz up to the apartment when common sense told him to be cautious. He already made the mistake of underestimating a situation recently, and he won't get caught off guard like that again. He's not wearing a mask, sure, but he's not stupid. This is a dangerous game.

Exhibit A: The large burly man with the cigarette hanging out on the platform just one flight of steps beneath Wade's bedroom window.

“You shouldn't be here neither, kid.” The guy says in accented English. Jesus, Wade probably pissed off the mob or something. The thought is...not surprising. There is probably more than one reason why Deadpool doesn't have a permanent place in New York, and it makes sense because nowadays he's a black market commodity that pisses off more people than he takes out.

Peter lugs two steps closer. The guy's got a piece in his waistband, something black, low caliber. It's a cheap, defensive weapon, one that Peter used to see a lot of downtown when he was still patrolling. “My roommate locked me out.” He smiles conspiratorially. “Have to break in through the window.” Peter takes another few steps upward, getting into Burly Man's space. On the street on the other side of the alley, brakes screech, a car honks. Someone shouts.

It's an eerie cacophony; New York always finds a way to weasel in. A reminder. *Hey, I'm still here. I'm still waiting!*

Burly Man blows smoke into Peter's face. He doesn't move.

Peter is a little screwed. Backed in. He was from the moment that he hung up the phone. He's got no mask and no shooters and yet he dropped everything at work and got on the subway anyway. Now he's at a standstill with a large man who has seen his face and looked into his eyes.

So fucked.

He's *not* Spider-Man right now.

It's broad daylight, the waning hours of a summer workday. The air is a sticky humid-hot, and there are people on the street at the mouth of the alley. None of this is inconspicuous and Peter doesn't have a mask.

Wade had told him he wasn't asking for Spider-Man, but Peter isn't deluding himself.

This is exactly what this situation warrants.

He knows exactly how this has to play out.

"Can you, like, move? You're blocking the steps." Peter asks. Burly Man just chuffs his chin and cocks an eyebrow. Which..."Christ." Peter mutters, "Screw it."

Peter is a lot stronger than he looks.

The rusty stairs creak beneath him but otherwise the world turns around him, New York takes a breath, nothing notices. Peter pauses, a panic-euphoria coming up once the man goes down.

With no clue what the hell he's going to do about Russian murder dude when he wakes up, Peter climbs the last flight.

He sticks to the brick, peeks over into the window into Wade's apartment. There's another Russian murder dude in there too, but his back is to the window. It looks like there was a struggle, though. There are a few bullet holes cracking the window, the bed is unmade in a way that does not suggest it was slept in, and the guy in the room is on the phone, one arm cradling his front torso in a way that Peter can't see. Peter doesn't see Wade, and without eyes on the inside it's impossible to tell if this is a suicide mission.

Wade said *trust me*, like it's easy. Like Peter even trusts himself.

His hands clench at his sides, ragged edges of bitten nails making sharp imprints into the meat of his palms. What the hell is he doing? Seventeen months ago he'd looked down the barrel of this life--groaning guys on fire escapes, adrenaline rescue missions, a Peter beneath layers, a Peter with an easy grin, a Peter who knew his strength and his powers and could use them, could live with them, could direct them--and he'd pulled the trigger.

But Wade said *trust me* .

Seventeen months ago they weren't friends and Peter was a hero without really knowing the consequences.

The world has upended since then, and yet the brick beneath his arms is still real and scratches his skin and the air still tastes like old garbage and the slow humidity of the East river drenches the summer air and New York pulses, it's primal, it breathes in, it breathes in and...

...and Wade can't die, so there's no such thing as mortal peril for him.

But Peter is here.

There's no gain in this.

Nothing shifts. The world gives no insight as to whether or not it notices.

But Peter's hands unclench. His fingers find the edge of the window. He lifts up.

1 year, 5 months

It's not until Peter has finished with the guy in the bedroom that he notices the slumped figure in the corner nearest the window.

Peter turns to survey the room. The bedroom door is closed, but Peter can hear people milling on the other side. It means he doesn't have a lot of time, and he has to be quiet. Swallowing, Peter takes in the rest of the room. Bloodstains on the dresser, a single drawer pulled out. It was empty and is now splintered, hanging limply from the barest connection with the chest of the dresser. Peter moves toward it to push it back in enough so it won't fall, and sees Wade.

He's maskless, shaking, and fixed to the wall by one of his own katanas.

"Wade?" Peter whispers. On the other side of the bedroom door, something crashes in the kitchen. He approaches, weary. "Wade, hey, c'mon, look at me."

Deadpool is muttering nonsense, blood smudged at the corners of his mouth. Up close, Peter can tell there's something off about his posture and the heavy loll of his neck. "Wade, hey." Peter crouches down at eye level, smacks at Wade's pockmarked cheek, trying to get his eyes to focus. Beneath his hand, Wade's cheek is rocky, wet with blood. "Hey, c'mon, talk to me."

Something is making a wet rattling sound, and it takes Peter a moment to recognize it as the sound of air in Wade's chest. It whistles around the katana in his chest through the puncture wound, as well as through his mouth. The katana bobbles with the force of air as Wade struggles to breathe. Peter looks down at it, pulling back from Wade, his hands hovering over the handle.

The blade is fixed well into the wall. It comes up through his right lung between his ribs and out just below his shoulder blade. There's no way to move Wade without taking it out of the drywall.

Wade gives a terribly small grunt, and he's back. "S'real?" Wade slurs, cloudy blue eyes focusing on Peter's hands. The katana bobbles a little more with his movement, slicing downward with gravity through bone and muscle. Wade's next words come out high, on the verge of exposing whatever terrible pain he's probably feeling. "S'real, Pete, s'real?" Wade manages, as wildly and as desperately as he can get in this state. His hand scrabbles in the carpet, restless, grasping.

It distracts Peter, his gaze skipping downward. There's the shattered remnants of electronics beside his fingers. His cell phone. Wade had probably called him while shish-kabobed to the wall.

Peter flattens his palm over Wade's hand to get him to stop, possibly to ground him. "Yeah, yeah, I'm real, this is real. You're okay." Peter babbles somewhat mindlessly. Something terrible is

growing in Peter's chest. Looking down at a terrified Wade, Peter decides to ignore it, for now. "It's me." He says instead. "I'm here."

The guy Peter just beat up gives an unconscious grunt, but stays otherwise still. They might have five more minutes, if they're lucky. In the kitchen, chattering voices get gruffer. They're waiting for something, or, more likely, *someone*.

Best bet is to run. If it comes down to fight or flight, Peter has a fatal flaw; his own face.

"What happened? Who are these guys?" Peter asks, Wade's eyes slide away, unfocused again. "Wade? *Hey*. Stay with me." Peter snaps, words souring with urgency. "You need to--"

Peter cuts off as Wade gives a noise that lacks both air and sound.

"You couldn't call the Avengers?" Peter asks, and Wade makes that noise again. He gives no indication he hears Peter. "Hey. Answer me. You couldn't call the Avengers?"

Wade's eyes flick open, and close again. "No." He says eventually... There's a lot to parse through that single word, but not now. Not now.

"Wade," Peter hisses. "What do I do?"

Wade smacks his lips. "'m dyin'" He chokes. Peter's hand is off his in an instant. He puts physical space between himself and those two bitten off words.

It's all the same. Close up. Slow. Far away. Fast. Slow feels almost the same as quickly, Peter thinks, a little distantly. He'd had mere seconds with Ben. Nothing with Gwen. They'd both just slipped away, the lines between breath and emptiness little more than metaphysical nothings. This line, right here? This is a finish line. This line is going to be *clawed* across.

The first hot vestiges of anger clutch at him, an anger that's seventeen months dry. No desperate or maniacal, but long. Flat.

Peter cups his hand around the top of the sword where it meets Wade's chest, a fruitless and useless attempt to stop the bleeding. "You have so much explaining to do." Peter threatens. His last words to Gwen were something along the lines of *I need to deal with this* , or *I can't risk you getting hurt* and they probably pissed Gwen off, she was probably angry at him when she died.

His last words to Ben he'd rather not relive.

"S'op it." Wade slurs again, breathy. A bubble of blood pops at his mouth. His left hand comes up and his hand circles Peter's wrist. It takes Peter a moment to realize that Wade is trying to tug him away. "s..top it."

"What?"

"Gotta," Wade's hand falls hard, back onto his lap. Peter's eyes follows the motion to the sprawl of his upper thighs, the odd angle of his hips. He gets it then. The posture. The slow movements.

His back is broken.

"Gotta," Wade swallows heavily, but a snake of blood follows the corner of his mouth, dips into a scar at the hollow of his throat, drops into the collar of his red uniform. "Take it out."

"The katana?"

“Get it out.”

“I...” Peter looks down to the unnatural bend of Wade’s hips, the pool of blood around his thighs. The grasp of the red muscle of his chest around cold steel. It’s pathetic and too intimate and a moment that Peter doesn’t want to be having. “You’ll die.”

Wade gives a little laugh, and it turns into a whimper. Peter jerks his gaze back to his face, where two small pinpricks of crystalline tears are forming in the ducts of Wade’s blue eyes.

“Yeah, but” Wade manages, wet and airy and desperately thin. “Death is...wasted...on me.” He’s grinning, teeth scarlet with phlegmy blood, his scars peeling up, eyes crinkling. He’s a wild, primal sort of beautiful. An adrenaline work of art.

Like he’d said all those months ago in Peter’s bedroom: this is the fabulous incapability of immortality.

“This is not a *joke*.” Peter hisses.

“What the fuck ever...Parker.” Wade returns. “Take it. Out.”

“I won’t.”

“Won’t?” Wade’s eyes sharpen for a moment. “Can’t.” He declares.

“I’m not--” He starts, cutting and sharp, a venomous bite to his words that cause him to stop after just two of them. The desperation creeps up again, wet instead of dry. “This is not happening.” His hands are bloody. “It’s not.”

Wade grunts, smile falling. “Heal.” he says. “Die. Heal.”

“I *can*’t.” Peter says desperately. Gwen’s face had been so fucking still. Still and bloodied and ethereal, and Peter can’t do that again.

“The hell...kinda...hero,” Wade gasps, “are you?”

“Not one. Wade, I--it’s not even that you’ll die--it’s--” It’s cold mornings in February, ash snow above sprawling headstones, the carved volcano in his chest. It’s fifteen minutes late to class and blood-dark bags underneath his eyes, having nothing to bargain with and nothing to bargain for but *wanting*, regardless. It’s the fact that the goddamn clocktower is still fucking there and Gwen *isn’t*, and Peter isn’t here, not in the way he was before. He can’t save people anymore. He’ll lose too much.

“Scared?” Wade coughs. “‘M the one who’s dyin.”

“You’re used to it.”

Wade’s eyes open again, colorless, pinched at the edges. “Gonna die. Either way.” He says tonelessly, “Can’t heal with the katana.” He says. “Spidey.” And he says, “help me.”

And he says. “Spidey,”

He says, “Please.”

“I can’t.” Peter tastes the words rotting in his mouth. “You know that.”

Wade lifts his eyes to fix Peter with a mean stare, the only look that has had any power behind it all

night. His jaw squares, nostrils flaring with the weight of his breath in. “You *can*.” He says, with grit.

Peter pauses a breath. Wade’s chest heaves with the motion.

This is the tick tick moment before the boom, the *it comes* part of *you take it*.

“Okay.” He says without meaning. “Okay.” He shifts in his knees and drops his head. His forehead is dangerously close to Wade’s shoulder. Another inch and he’d be resting there. “You got a spare mask?”

It takes a beat. “Third drawer.”

“Gloves there too?”

Just a grunt this time.

“I don’t suppose a spare suit is too much to ask?”

Wade laughs that same whimper-laugh from before and accuses, “Copier.”

Peter takes a steadying breath, his lungs filling with the smell of blood, gunpowder, and paprika. And then he shoves away. Standing up, he grips the katana with a hand much steadier than he thinks it should be.

“See you on the other side.” Peter says, and yanks.

1 year, 5 months

It comes free like a knife through butter, sliding through sinew and organs and scraping against bone, lubricated with blood.

Wade gives an unearthly quiet gasp, throaty and full of blood, his mouth coming open wide, unable to move his back or his legs to bend into the pain.

And then with a gurgle he slumps over, blood pooling faster, the carpet darkening to black beneath him. His suit stays impeccably red, though.

“Atta boy,” Wade gurgles, the blood from his mouth a steady stream now. It’s in his ears.

Peter drops the katana with a clatter and takes a stumbling step backwards, away from the swirling sounds of death in front of him. He doesn’t blink. His eyes stay wide, unable to look away, like watching Gwen reach up to him, like being unable to look at the ground behind her, cataloguing the tears in her eyes, the open gape of her mouth.

Wade takes death with a smirk.

1 year, 5 months

In a bizarre halo of groaning bodies, Peter drops to his knees, gravity finally bringing him down.

There's glass on the ground from the coffee table and the window. The television has fallen from the wall. The apartment sits silent, Peter's racing heart pounding heavy in his ears.

He drops his chin to his chest, trying to catch his breath. He still doesn't have a lot of time and there's a dead body in the other room.

This is the ashes of a simple fight, a quiet stillness of adrenaline, paused breath, empty space. The flames are coals, still hot to the touch, but it's over. This is what's left over:

Five Russian mobsters, still breathing. Most of them didn't speak English, and most of them had guns without registration numbers and bullets issued from a foreign government.

One broken coffee table.

The fridge, sitting gaping open, its door deformed and dented.

A bag of apples, split after being used as a weapon, its fruit dented and spread over the carpeting.

Bullet casings. Gunpowder. Holes in the wall.

Peter Parker in the heaving center, clad in khakis and a button down, red gloves, a black and red mask.

Ghosts fought this fight, flipped the table, struck with an elbow, swung from the wall into the heavy chest of the biggest grunt. They linger, still, in the quiet.

Like a Renaissance painting, life for a moment is muted, heavily frozen in oil paintings, an inhuman chaos captured in stillness.

Peter takes off the gloves but keeps the mask, and rises.

1 year, 5 months

Wade is dead.

The apartment is so quiet and Peter's breath takes up most of the space as it limps out of his lungs. He's frozen in the doorway. There's so much blood.

He catches his breath for a few moments, noticing the way the room feels humid and tastes like copper, and then forces himself to move, to get closer.

The wounds aren't bleeding anymore, and the body on the ground is eerily still. Even swinging from the web, Gwen had still been ethereally still, like a rock tied to a pendulum. She'd been weightless in his arms.

Peter sits on the bed, watching the blood sink into the carpet. Once it's supersaturated, some of it starts to ooze over itself, too thick to be anything other than lifeblood. He watches in disconnected fascination as it lazily creeps toward him, viscous, dark red, full of deeper, gooyey clots.

There isn't enough of it to reach his shoes, but it gets close. Wade lies at the center of the scarlet pond but Peter doesn't look at him anymore. He wonders, a little distantly, what had happened.

He doesn't know how much time passes.

After a while, there's a *sniick*, a click, and a very wet, hyperrealistic inhale, and Wade's body shudders. Then, there is about fifteen seconds of silence, stillness, and he exhales, shuddering. His body falls into a wet exhale and then attempts to find a limping rhythm.

And that's when the front door blows in.

1 year, 5 months

Apparently, Wade has two cell phones. One is a burner he uses to talk to Peter. The other is a StarkTech prototype.

Wade had managed two phone calls before being overrun.

So when Peter asked, "You couldn't call the Avengers," Wade was lying. He already had.

Peter's got his hands up in the middle of the room, cornered by five SHIELD agents. They clocked him in thirty seconds ago as an unknown, HQ responded with a go ahead to take him in.

The first guy who moved in hadn't fared well. These might be the relative "good" guys but Peter's not in the mood for this shit not now, not when Wade is still unconscious and his face is still masked and the world still feels like gravity has loosened by a few newtons.

Agent 1 down, the rest got weary. Training tells them to; they're smart enough to see that Peter is enhanced.

"I'm not going to ask you again." the agent on point snarls. His head jerks, and three agents come closer. "Who the hell are you?"

"Take the mask off." Another says.

If he takes his mask off it could be over, right? Like. *Over*.

If he takes off the mask publicly, he takes it off for good. But that's the thing--no matter how distorted the suit looked on his bedroom floor all those nights ago, no matter how frayed his current mask is, how hollow the eyepieces look, no matter the off-red color, it's still Peter who gives Spider-Man shape.

"So tell us who you are." Agent Angry says, trigger finger tightening. The safety comes off. "Now."

"Identity or the mask." Number Two says.

Peter's mouth gapes. "I'm--"

He shucks a bullet into the chamber. "Today, Junior." His face twists. "It's not been a very good couple of months, and putting a bullet into one of you hacker motherfuckers would really make my day."

"Um," Peter says, "Okay, first of all, that's really problematic--"

“Mask. Now.” Two loads a bullet. Peter has his hands up, they could take him if they tried. They’re assuming he’s not human. They’re assuming the only way they win is with bullets.

If Peter takes off his mask, what’s he going to say? Hey, I’m Peter Parker?

What’s he going to say to keep it on?

Would they believe him?

“I don’t..”

“Webs.” A croak, from the bed. Deadpool, sitting up with a shaky hand. The SHIELD agents’ attention diverts, their guns lowering. Peter could take them. He could take them right now with everything intact, with nothing changed, no life ruining page turn, no admission, nothing new or old, just Peter, just Peter, he could win, he could return to the mean, regress to it, even, he could--”Tell them.”

He opens his mouth again. “I’m not going to--”

“Webs.” Deadpool croaks again, face gone pale but set still.

“Webs?” Agent Frown demands. “What the hell are you talking about?”

If Peter tells them, he puts Spider-Man to rest in that grave right beside Gwen.

It occurs to him in the moment, this limbo has never felt right, has never felt *easier*. It’s because he wasn’t ready to give Gwen up, of course, but he still hasn’t given Spider-Man up.

There is still a part of him that wants to do good.

If the suit is the mask that Peter wears, Peter is Spider-Man's skin.

“Fuck,” he laughs a little, even as tears spring into the corners of his eyes. “I’m surprised you didn’t guess it from the outfit.” He drops a hand, tugs his collar. Extends it for Agent Unhappy to shake. “Hi,” He says. “I’m Spider-Man. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Chapter End Notes

this needs another edit but i am so tired of obsessing over it so here ya go

Chapter Summary

“I’m not back.” He argues.

“You will be.” Wade says to the ceiling. “In sixth months or a year or tomorrow.”

Chapter Notes

So this is it. Last chapter. The end. I just wanted to say thank you all for your support. It’s been amazing and terrible, all at once; this used to be something that itched at me enough to write maybe 10k, and now look where i am. I am amazed and still confused, because 75k later and i still don’t know what grief is. So from the bottom of my heart. Even with this being the end, I have more written, so you might get an epilogue (?) and a potential follow-up one shot (?) but i am actually happy with the way this ended up. Thank you. Let me know what you thought!

Also: 75,000 words in, and here is the most slash part of this ‘pre/slash’. The quote at the end pretty much encapsulates everything I was trying to touch upon in this fic, some of my favorite lines i might have ever written are in this chapter and the previous, life has been SUPREME overdrive lately so that’s why this is late, and thanks. Again. Thanks for sticking with me.

I have something angsty in the works for Wade, and I want to return to my long-forgotten other work, so stay tuned if you want

Okay, shutting up now.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Harry squints into the breeze. “God, it’s so fucking nice out.” He says, tipping his head into the sun. The action tugs the cords in his neck, lengthens them. Harry is a long line in the sun, his hospital gown flapping in the wind. The breeze exposes the top edge of his scrub pants and expanse of his naked back, cut through with thin white scars. On the tender flesh of his arms sits a half dozen track marks from IVs and forced boosters.

Peter, perched behind Harry on the concrete tabletop of a picnic table, starts to peel the orange he’d found in Harry’s hospital-approved lunch. He makes a non-committal noise. “It’s a little nippy.” He disagrees, not trying to be insouciant but just sarcastic. He doesn’t know what he’s playing at, can’t figure it out.

He and Harry are not friends.

Harry whirls and gives him a dark look. “Brat.” He accuses. He’s too thin, all bones and cartilage. His gown tips to show carved collarbones. Green climbs like ivy up his neck.

Peter shoves a slice of orange into his mouth because he doesn't feel like replying. He won't fall into old banter. It's not a good idea.

Harry notices and his face falls a little. He turns, scratching the back of his neck with green-faded fingers. Harry takes a few steps away, curling his hands around the tags on his wrist and tips his face up again.

"You look better." Peter offers, the silence stretching, awkward. Harry usually isn't cognizant enough to have an awkward silence. His silences are generally sick and filled with mutterings that don't have enough air behind them.

Harry shrugs.

With his face angled in profile, Peter can see the white chipped side of his brief smile. He's proud of where he's come from, no doubt. Harry doesn't like who he is, doesn't like what fate and his father and chemistry made him into. It's not hard to understand why.

They don't talk about her, or what happened.

The breeze dies a little, leaving Peter hot, the sweat on his forearms itchy. It's quiet in the courtyard, no birds or people or even traffic noises. Sitting in the silence, Peter feels like someone is screwing nails into his bones.

In the shower, in those discordant hours directly after Gwen died, the tub had drained blood-pink. But, the watercolor swirl at the bottom of his tub had been mostly his own blood. It had been matted in his hair from the head injury, smudged along his temples, caked underneath his mouth. The Goblin had hit Spider-Man into the brick, left finger-shaped bruises on his shoulders, deep purple-blue universes over his ribcage. Peter had been an impressionist study in yellows, purples, blacks, and browns for weeks. Gwen hadn't bled at all, save from her head and her nose. The blood on the ground in the clocktower probably wasn't all hers. Some of it had to be Spider-Man's.

Peter thinks about that now, how it had hurt to breathe even after his ribs had healed.

Harry is content in the quiet, long fingers clawed around each other, green neck still stretched, no tension in his shoulders. Peter looks past him, to the stainless steel curve of the building, the cement and concrete. The hospital looms over him and blots out the horizon. Cornered on both sides, the courtyard is lush green and hot sun, protected from the oncoming autumn. The world around him is adaptive, and unthinkingly different.

Peter's eyes are crusting over from a lack of blinking. Even though he's not looking at anything in particular he can't look away. Gwen hadn't bled at all, hadn't died with any sort of glory. She had just cracked open. Humpty dumpty sat on a wall, and all the king's forces.

Peter doesn't realize that Harry has moved until there's a green shape in his face. "Pete, bud." Harry says, "Pete. Hey."

Peter blinks, focuses. The Green Goblin is in his face, and Gwen hadn't bled but she'd broken, a porcelain mortality.

Peter starts back, hands up in defense, before he realizes that this is *Harry*. The realization chokes his breath in his throat, and the Goblin disappears before his eyes.

"Jesus." Harry says, backing up. The shallow ditches beneath his eyes sink in a little more.

"Sorry," Peter says, heaving in heavy lungfuls of the smell of fresh grass and the funeral-home

perfection of wilting flowers. He blinks again and centers himself in the sun, drags himself from that clocktower and those few moments.

It's not something he's had to do for a long time now, maybe eight or ten months. It scares him, for a moment, because what if he never heals? What if, no matter what he does, he'll always end up back at that moment, that place? How could--

"Hey." Harry says, not looking at him again, hands cupped around his torso.

"What?" Peter asks again, taking a few longer breaths, waiting, letting them out. "Sorry. I zoned out for a second."

"Does that happen a lot?"

Peter considers this. He thinks about sitting alone in a SHIELD hallway. They hadn't cuffed him but they hadn't trusted the guy wearing Deadpool's mask at his word. They'd asked him questions--no bloodwork, no camera work, no computer analysis--and then told Spider-Man he was free to go, and he was welcome back. Since then he's been caught in the past, thinking, thinking.

Spider-Man had bled and lived, and that meant something, it did. Gwen hadn't bled and died, and that meant something too.

"I'm just tired." Peter answers.

"Tired." He repeats. Harry's gaze falls to his own bare feet, toes curling in the grass. "Why do you keep visiting?" His small voice has edged a little, any humor gone.

"I--"

"Don't." Harry cuts, quietly. "Just tell me the truth."

"Harry." Peter says, and stops. Most days are not good like this. Most days Harry's lips curl around words and his brain mushes into hatred and he says things like *She knew you would kill her. She didn't scream.*

Most days he foams from his hospital bed because Harry is *sick*. He's sick into his marrow and has no control over it. His recovery is a process that doesn't always look positive; sometimes the valleys are so deep and so low that Peter doesn't think his Harry, his best friend, will ever climb out of them.

Those are the days long fingernails cut into palms and the bed frame jerks underneath velcro straps. Those days the Goblin snarls at Peter from his bonds and Peter has to swallow bile when he leaves. And Peter goes home and turns off the lights in his apartment and tries to breathe himself through the shock of the fact that the Goblin is still here. He's not dead too. He lived.

Two survivors emerged from the wreckage of a ship that carried three. Maybe Harry's recovery is not that different from Peter's, after all.

"I don't know." Peter says, honestly.

Harry snorts. "Cut the shit" He replies derisively, a croak to his voice that has Peter stiffening, bracing himself for the bad side to show up.

Harry keeps eye contact this time, his eyes almost glowing with some kind of passion. Peter drops his eyes first. His fingers start picking at the fray on his jeans. He works his jaw.

It's going to sound pathetic, and Peter can't make sense of it himself, but he clears his throat and says, quietly. "I want you to get better."

There's a long moment.

"What?" Harry croaks. Peter picks his head up again. The look on Harry's face is one he's never seen before.

"I do. It's true." Peter shrugs. They don't talk about her, or what happened, and maybe it's stupid. Maybe the future holds no healing or forgiveness, and maybe this is naive, but this tragedy is not Peter's to claim, just his to share. He wants to move away from it. He wants his heart to unclench.

Harry is still peering at him. "Okay." He says finally.

"Yeah?" Peter asks, hopeful.

Harry's mouth quirks, a little.

"Alright." He says.

There's another beat, and then Peter holds out the last sliver of orange, lying forgotten on Harry's lunch tray. Harry looks at it a moment, and takes the orange.

He doesn't take a bite; instead, Harry sits down next to Peter, tilts his face into the sun, and doesn't speak again.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Wade asks lazily from behind Peter, gesturing somewhere at Peter's back. He's shitfaced, which Peter didn't even think was possible, but whatever.

Peter lines up his shot, pauses a moment, elbow cocked at the ready, breath paused, and--

Wade hooks a hand into his elbow and drags it down. "Hey." He says, a lazy grin creeping up his face. He's close enough that the smell of alcohol is cloying, Peter can see vodka still wet and glistening on Wade's lower lip.

"You screwed up my concentration." Peter complains. Wade's hand tightens in the crook of Peter's elbow. On the other side of the bar, the speakers switch to a new song, and the rowdy group in the front corner booth starts to cheer.

"You're kicking my ass." Wade says, throwing a hand toward the score. Peter has won three games to Wade's one. Deadpool won the first one in succinct and easy victory, before sauntering off to the bar for celebratory shots. He'd brought back orange juice for Peter (an attempt to imply that Peter was a baby for not drinking, but that had gone poorly, because Peter loves free orange juice), and three shots of Petron for himself. It had denigrated from there.

"I take darts seriously." Peter tells him, which he doesn't, but whatever. "Did you get drunk just so you could gather enough confidence to ask me to 'talk about this'?" Peter asks him unkindly.

Wade glares at Peter.

“You asked me here, remember?” Peter gestures around them with his free arm, at the half-empty dingy little bar. The floor is sticky and this is the *third* time they’ve played “Welcome to the Jungle,” since Peter got here. Wade is still in his personal space. Peter has to tip his chin a little to look him in the eye.

“Okay, okay, fair.” Wade finally lets go of Peter’s arm and takes a step back. Peter tries to drown out the guitar and the guys and Wade to line his shot up again.

He hits white, two rings from the bullseye, and Peter curses under his breath.

“But when I invited you here, to this very fine establishment, you had to see this comin’, right? You’re a smart cookie. Like so smart, Jesus, just those fuckin’ glasses, I--” he cuts off abruptly, reaching for more of his drink. “Point is, you had to know.”

Peter rolls his eyes. “You’re not particularly eloquent. Or fond of important conversations.”

Wade lurches to line up and sends his dart lazily at the board. It hits almost right next to Peter’s. It irks him, because Peter knows he got these skills from his ability to line up a sniper rifle at a human being.

Wade spins on his heel. He moves to point at Peter and jabs him right in the chest. “Look. Look. I like you and all. But like. Every time we start to argue you go straight below the belt, you know that? Like. You’re a mean bean.” Wade says, and then laughs. “Mean bean.”

“I--”

“Like is it fuckin’ relevant that I have no social skills? Do you really gotta go there, man? I’m just tryna apologize for you having to see me get ganked. I ain’t no pretty sight.”

Peter deflates. “That’s not what I meant.” He says.

“Yeah?” Wade asks, and while all the fight has gone out of Peter, his voice is still as bitter as it was, scars cut like shadows into his cheekbones. “Sure it wasn’t.” He clears his throat, “I need another drink, Petey.” He says, and turns around to go.

Peter watches Wade’s retreating back, suddenly stressed, not knowing what in particular triggered it. He fiddles with the last dart in his hand for a moment and then places it carefully down on the nearest sticky table.

He finds Wade near the back of the establishment in a corner booth big enough for ten but dark enough that Wade has lowered the hood of his sweatshirt. His gloveless fingers trace the rim of a newly full glass of whatever cheap shitty alcohol Wade has been drinking all night. Vodka cranberry, from the looks of it. Wade doesn’t look up when Peter approaches, and Peter has a feeling for some reason he wasn’t invited to sit, so he leans against the back wall, which, somehow, is also sticky.

“You can fuck off out of here.” Wade says in a familiar flippant tone but doesn’t raise his eyes. His thumb stops around the side of his glass and his hand stills. “Don’t have to stay.”

“You asked me to.”

Wade snorts, takes a sip. “Since when does that mean anything.”

Peter works his jaw around an apology.

He's so tired, so very very tired, of fighting, of being angry, of being belligerent, of being sad.

Cards on the table, this is important to him.

Peter works his jaw around an apology but decides against it.

"It does. It has." Peter says, and Wade looks up at him sharply. Peter pauses. He says slowly, "I'll leave if you want."

Wade's jaw tightens but he doesn't say anything. Peter unsticks himself from the wall and slides into the booth across from Wade. The table is sticky, as well. Wade watches him warily before relaxing back into the cushions and becoming absorbed back in his drink.

"I'm not ready to talk about what happened to me the other day." Peter finally says. He'd talked about it enough with the SHIELD grunts after he followed them out of Wade's apartment. "But, uh, that's not what you wanted to talk about, was it."

Wade's mouth curls into a few breaths of laughter. He takes another sip. "I've died a lotta times Pete. You ain't special."

"Okay." Peter says slowly again. "What's it like?"

Wade shoots him a look. "What's what like?"

"Death."

Wade laughs again, more genuine, and drains his drink. "It hurts. Usually. Just this last time I had a knife in my chest."

Peter gives in, lets himself smile wryly. "I know. I was there."

"Yo, you know once Cap threw his shield in front of me? Stopped a bullet. *Ping*." Wade replies. "Saved my life. And then some little shit Avenger, don't recall which one, just up and fucking said, 'why'd you do that?' said, 'doesn't matter either way, he'll just come back.' said, 'Next time don't waste the energy.'"

Wade fiddles with his empty glass and in the silence that follows, Peter absorbs that a little numbly, then, "I see why wanted me before any of them."

"Yeah. Jesus." Wade laughs again. His grin is syrupy, lopsided. Uninhibited in a way that's both adorable and reminds Peter starkly that he's slurring his words and probably saying things with even less of a filter than normal. "Look. Hey. Pete." Wade says, "Can I tell you somethin'?"

"If it's something you'd tell me sober?"

"I probably wouldn't." Wade admits. "But, what you did, the other day? I get it, man. I get that you didn't wanna be there, that you didn't want to come back, but...but I don't have a lotta people who would do that for me. Okay? And I don't get a lotta people who want me to come back to life after I die so you--" He cuts off, suddenly trying to get the last drop of alcohol from his glass. "You--fuck, you don't--" he tries again, and then backs away from whatever statement he was going to make. "I don't got a lotta people." He finishes, eyes on his glass.

Peter pauses a moment, and then says. "You can call me, you know."

Wade smiles. "You might regret saying that."

“Eh. You already call me.” Peter shrugs. He fights away the sliver of the smile from his face. It had appeared without his permission.

Wade sticks his tongue at him. “Anyway, what’d SHIELD say about Spider-Man being back?”

“You’re not going to divert me that easily.”

Deadpool puts on an innocent half-smile, none of the usual self-deprecation in his expression. “I’m curious. I was still half dead when they carted you with them back to HQ. I bet Stark shit a brick. Wonder-child back in black.”

“He’s--I’m not back.” Peter says half-heartedly.

Wade scoffs. “Don’t give me that shit.”

Peter looks at him sharply. “Don’t presume to--”

“I’m not tryna fight with you about this. I know better.” He pauses. “You know that usually people who bicker this much are at least sleeping together, right?”

Peter levels a look. “You really think sleeping together would uncomplicate our relationship?”

Wade pauses a moment. And then he tips his head back, and starts to laugh.

MJ comes back to town for an audition, so they grab a late dinner in the city. Peter gets off work and meets her uptown at the mid-priced restaurant where they both pretend to be fancy human beings though they’re ordering the cheapest stuff off the menu.

“You look better,” She says, rosy around her second glass of wine.

“Better?” He asks her, which is stupid. The last time MJ saw him he had been *stabbed*.

“Gained back that weight you lost.” She smirks.

“Callin’ me fat?”

“Calling you *healthy*. ” She kicks him under the table. “You look good.” She gives a wag of her eyebrows that’s overt enough to be jokingly sexual. He doesn’t stop the smile at that--they’re finally in a place where they can joke like this. He thinks their friendship is as solid as it’s ever been.

“Thank you.” He tips his water glass at her.

Her eyebrows settle, and she takes a deep breath. “How long has it been?” She asks, and then adds, “Since Gwen died.” because MJ is not subtle and never has been. She’s an actress, of course she’s not.

Peter swirls his ice around. “About a year and a half. ” He pauses, “Almost two.”

“Do you miss her?” And then, “Crap, that was stupid, Peter, of course you--”

“No, it’s okay.” He says, his mouth drying. He wants to push past it. Of course he does right now--

sitting in the mood lighting of a fancy restaurant with his ex-girlfriend, he wants to talk about the dead love of his life. Peter is terrible at conversation, yes, he knows that. “It’s so weird. Missing someone like this. Not rational.”

“It has to be rational?”

“No. No, It’s just--” Because how does he explain this? He feels like he’d need a million words to get it right. “Gwen liked the ducks, when we went to Turtle Pond in Central Park. You know how they are.”

“Fat and mean,” MJ supplies, eyes a little distant.

“Yeah. But Gwen liked ‘em. We went on a picnic once, the summer we first met. It was hot and gross and I--” had three broken ribs from fighting Doc Ock the night before “--wasn’t in the best mood. But she kept getting them to come near us with little pieces of her sandwich. Anyway,” he says, “One of them bit me.”

“Seriously?” MJ laughs.

Peter smiles a little around his water straw. “Yeah and instead of making me madder,” he says, “It made me laugh.”

And it had hurt, laughing around three broken ribs.

“I was at Turtle Pond the other day after work, trying to blow off some steam with my camera. I took a picture of one of the ducks, thinking it looked mean enough to be the one that had bit me. It’s a damn good picture, too. The thing looks like it’s about to square up.

“Anyway, I got all the way home to show her--I thought it would make her laugh-- and it wasn’t until I locked the door behind me that I remembered.”

MJ lets out a hurt breathe, “Oh, Pete...”

“It’s not all that different from the way that I think about Ben, really. Sometimes it hurts more than the day that they died. Sometimes it doesn’t. But it’s always constant. Sometimes it’s quieter or louder but it’s always just *there*.” Like a room he’s alone in, that he retreats to and closes the door and turns the lights out and just *feels* . “It’s a little like I’m searching for her, but she’s just...” He trails off, tapping lightly against his sternum. “The only place she is...is here.” His thumb digs in, above his heart.

MJ catches her lip with her pristine white front teeth, and says, in a shaky voice. “You really loved Gwen, didn’t you.” Peter looks at her sharply, then, the sadness in her face, and it’s like slamming into a brick wall.

Maybe not today or tomorrow, or even this week. But at some point in the near future he’s going to sit her down, and he’s going to tell her.

He’ll say, “MJ,” he’ll start, “I want to tell you about why we broke up. I want to tell you about the bruises.” He’ll be nervous, probably, wondering if this is a good choice. But he’ll continue on, because she deserves this, because he trusts her, because pushing people away has lost him too much, and because, despite everything, what he’s going to tell her is still true.

May watches him with fond eyes. “I think I remember teaching you table manners.”

Peter glances up from her casserole, his favorite. It’s delicious. With a full mouth, still chewing, he says, “What’s that supposed to mean?” he flashes her a cheesy (no pun intended) smile.

May purses her lips, but Peter knows she’s trying to hold back a smile. “Pleasant.”

“The Amish chew with their mouth open as a sign that they like the food.” Peter scoops another bite in.

“That’s absolutely not true.”

“You’re right. I think that’s burping.”

“That’s not true either.”

Peter grunts, eats another forkful. “Just take the compliment.”

She rolls her eyes. Peter probably learned his sarcasm from her, now that he thinks about it. “You’re welcome, dear.” And then, with a touch of concern. “Have you been feeding yourself well?”

Peter winks, mostly because he doesn’t want to bring the mood down with her right now. He just wants to have dinner with his aunt. Maybe forget for a little bit. “Not as well as you feed me?”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, Peter Benjamin.” She scowls at him, but scoops him another serving, despite herself.

Peter whirls at the tap on his window.

Crouched on the fire escape with a greasy pizza box sits Wade Wilson, who taps again when he sees Peter looking. He then jimmies the window open and steps through.

Peter with his bedhead and pj’s on, as it’s 5AM, watches a moment and then says. “Pizza?”

“You called me.” Wade says smugly.

“Yeah, I know, but pizza?”

“You don’t have to have any.”

“Um. Okay. “

Wade opens up the box and takes two pieces at once. Peter makes grabby hands. “Seriously?” He holds the box aloft. “You can’t judge me for my 5AM pizza and then expect me to share it.” Wade smirks. “Also, PSA, I can see the outline of your dick in your jammies.”

It has the predicted reaction. Peter immediately takes a step back and looks down at himself. He’s wearing his usual ratty old purple pants with Snoopy on them and an old oversized green shirt that spells THINK with periodic elements (thorium, indium, potassium). He’s completely covered.

When he looks up, a hot pink blush spread from his ears down his neck, Wade is shoving three whole pieces of pizza into his mouth at once.

“I hate you.” Peter says, embarrassed even with nothing to be embarrassed about.

“Aw. You’re cute. You can have a slice, I changed my mind. “ Wade says through a mouthful. He sets the box on the table. “So what’s the sitch?”

After Peter’s nonresponse, some of Wade’s grin falters. “Are you...have you slept?” He moves as if to touch the skin under Peter’s eyes but doesn’t at the last second. “Are you okay?”

“Um.” Peter says. He’s been standing in his kitchen for eleven hours now, just at a fucking loss. He’d called Wade an hour ago, with nothing else he could think of doing.

“What happened?” Wade asks. Restless, he leaves the pizza on the table and wanders into the kitchen.

It’s not like Wade is stupid. He’ll see the box sitting there, see the note sitting on top scrawled in messy hand.

For our mutual friend .

XOXO TS

He’ll see the ball of fabric, the new eyepieces, the fluid material. It had been sitting on Peter’s desk this morning when he came into work. Wade will connect the dots because it’s not hard to.

In Peter’s kitchen is a whole new Spider-Man, more technology, sturdier suit, still red. Still blue.

“What happened?” Peter feels distantly acidic, suddenly. He might have to bring up mood swings in his next appointment with his therapist, because-- “What happened is that I let my girlfriend fall to her death,” He turns, and sure enough Wade is rifling through the box. The suit is new-age. It’s nice. Complex poly-carbons, interior insulation. Alloy padded inserts, knife-proof, splash-proof. Perfectly cut holes in the gloves for the shooters, and a new chrome encasement for the fluid. “What happened is that I put a mask on because *you* were going to die and I’m tired of the guilt, Wade,” At the sound of his name, Wade looks up at Peter, a glove clutched in his hands. The palm fabric is light enough for Peter to grip to walls, but sturdy enough that the brick won’t give him callouses. “I’m tired of wondering whether or not Spider-Man is a poison. I wanted to help people.” The acid wells, “What *happened* is that five years ago I got bit by a spider and my uncle died telling me that I have a responsibility to my people, and since then the *only* thing that’s mattered to me is fulfilling that, and what *happened* is that I failed her, I failed her no matter how hard I tried, and--” his voice cracks, he hadn’t realized that wetness was gathering in his throat and at the corners of his eyes. Peter isn’t even sure what he’s saying anymore, the buzzing in his ears is so loud. He just knows that it’s a combination of sleep deprivation and ground-deep fear that has him babbling, spilling his guts. “and I’m terrified that it still doesn’t matter, that I’ll try and I’ll fail, I’ll fail her again, and fail my uncle, and everything I’ve been trying to heal, everything I think I’ve come to terms with is just some sort of...of bullshit, because Spider-Man..me...Peter Parker just *can’t* help people, was never meant to, and I don’t have a lot left, Wade, I don’t--” He’s cut off, suddenly, by Wade stepping toward him, closer, and then his arms are around Peter’s shoulders, and Peter can’t talk around the tightness, his lips pushed into Wade’s clavicle.

It shocks the words out of him and for a very long moment, this is the worst that Peter has felt in a very long time.

And then Wade readjusts his grip on the back of Peter's t-shirt. Peter's hands, stagnant at his sides, hook around Wade's waist hesitantly. Wade gives tight hugs, his arms muscle-corded and warm, and Peter is surprised, more than anything.

"What if I can't do it?" Peter asks him, after a moment. After his words come out muffled, he shifts, tucking his eyes into Wade's clavicle.

Wade grumbles a laugh that Peter feels in his own jawbone. "You think too much, nerd." He says, and one hand slips to cup Peter's neck, his thumb settling gently behind his ear. "You want to be back? Be back. You can figure the rest out as it comes."

Peter considers this a moment. "I don't--I can't--Gwen," he manages, unable to articulate.

"She's dead." Wade says, and absorbs Peter's flinch by drawing him closer. Peter can hear his heartbeat. "That's it. Debate all you want about what she'd think about Spidey's resurrection, if she'd blame Spidey, whatever. Still dead. It's not up to her."

"Don't--don't talk like that."

Wade's thumb behind Peter's ear moves in a lazy circle. "If you're not ready, you're not ready."

"You told me," Peter says, caught briefly in how weird and how fitting this conversation is, and the fact that they're not having it face-to-face but rather from the clutches of the longest and tightest hug Peter has ever had. "You told me, before, you told me to get over whatever it was, and get back into the suit." He paraphrases. Wade's exact words had been something along the lines of *go brush your webshooters, your city needs you*, and Peter had broken his pinky finger afterward punching Wade in the face.

Wade sighs. His thumb stills. "That was before I started having an active interest in you as a human being." He says. "The thing in that box over there is just fabric, Peter." He says. "You wouldn't be freaking out so much about it unless it meant more to you than that."

Peter lets out a harsh breath. "Christ." He says. "Since when did you get so rational?"

Wade drops his hand from Peter's neck, puts some air between them but doesn't step out of the embrace. "I saw your dick through your jammies. It really cleared my head."

Wade starts laughing, and Peter pushes him away. The push is hard enough that Wade lands on his ass, still laughing. "I really hate you." Peter says. "Asshole."

Wade just laughs from his position on the ground.

Abruptly, he starfishes on Peter's living room floor, eyes fixed on the ceiling. "So Spider-Man," He says, shit-eating and breathless. "Can I come with you on your first patrol?"

Peter pauses a moment. His eyes zero in on the new mask from where it's spilling out of the cardboard box on his counter. "I'm not back." He argues. He paces the way to the counter, exhaustion hitting him suddenly, his throat raw, his eyes sunken. His heart beating.

"You will be." Wade says to the ceiling. "In sixth months or a year or tomorrow."

Peter doesn't reply. *For our mutual friend*, the note says, and the lenses in this new suit are shinier, polarized better, probably. The webbing that spreads from the eyes is a more electric shade of blue, the shape of the spindling lines different. This Spider-Man mask is a vastly new one from the last, eons different from the old wrestling mask he still has tucked in his closet.

Wade, who is a child that doesn't like to be ignored, says. "So what'll it be, Spidey? You and me? First patrol?"

Peter plucks the mask from the box. Looks down at it. "Second," he says, distantly, hooking his fingers into the fabric. "You can come on my second patrol."

Peter puts his hand inside the mask to give it shape, to give it meaning.

He misses her so much still, an ache that time isn't going to dull or replace. Time just brings him further into the abstract idea of grief, makes it more comfortable, a torture so exquisitely slow eventually he had to sink into it. It hurts from the bottom of his lungs, into the corners of his stomach. It hurts behind his eyelids and beneath his fingertips.

But he holds this hurt, because it means she was *there*. It means she touched his life and he touched hers, even for the most fleeting of moments.

This terrible pain for the person he loved is *because* he loved, and was loved back. It's beautiful and terrible all at once, like planets colliding or neutron stars swallowed by black holes.

Like sunrise over the water of a day at the lake, this is the fleeting and cold and gorgeous reality of mortality.

This is the type of resplendent love and loss that breaks and holds, that weakens and strengthens, that blazes, quick, bright, painful, painless, and then dies all the same.

This is a room with the shades drawn. In it, Peter Parker, Gwen Stacy, and Spider-Man.

"I believe that the ultimate lesson all of us have to learn is unconditional love, which includes not only others, but toward ourselves as well. Love is really the only thing we can possess, keep with us, and take with us.

I also believe that we are solely responsible for our choices and we have to accept the consequences of every deed, word, and thought throughout our lifetime.

We often assume that if we do--if we are good people, we will not suffer the ills of this world. But life is unfair.

Death is unfair.

We live despite it."

~Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

more [fanart](#)!! thanks to theannster again!

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